



THE HOLE IN THE GROUND

What this story is about:

Had it not been for the chance discovery by four senior boys of an underground passage, young Denver's disappearance from his dormitory at Ramsden College might have remained a mystery for longer than it did. They knew at once where he had gone, but rescue would not be so simple, for besides having to deal with a dangerous and ruthless human enemy, they would have to face the grimmer horror which lurked in the darkness of the tunnel.



He felt himself jerked to his feet.

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THE HOLE IN THE GROUND

by Commander Tom Thompson



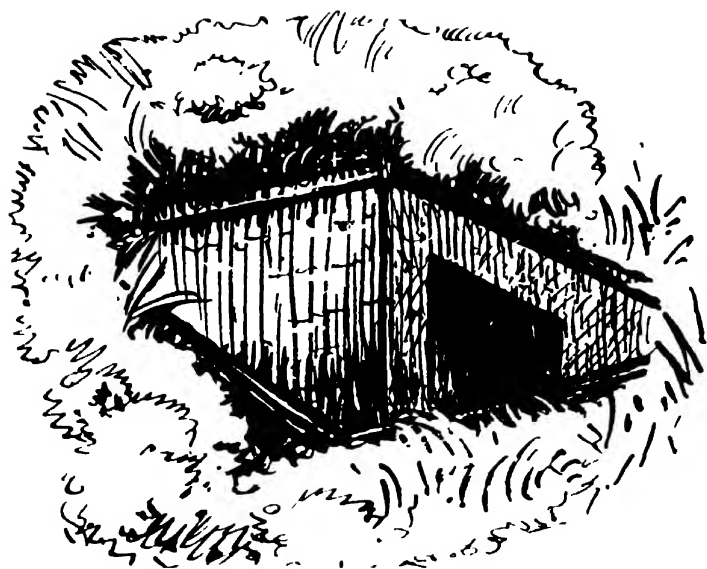
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CHAPTER ONE

Enter the Villain

THE first school day of the Easter term at Ramsden College had ended. Dr. Mansfield, the headmaster, stood in front of his study fire filling his pipe. He was listening. Mr. Cromarty, the senior housemaster, was talking.

"Of course it is all round the school that the Sixth are being taught their multiplication tables, and the Sixth do not like it. They would have taken it from you, Head, but not from this new man, Marshall. They feel that being taught by a man without a degree is a slight to their dignity. But, what rankles even more, he suggests that they can neither multiply nor add."

Dr. Mansfield chuckled. "The solution is obvious. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Marshall must take each junior form once a week; his methods will stifle their mirth and reintroduce respect for the Sixth. In any case, we will hear Marshall's side. I have asked him to drop in after rounds."

"Who is he? What is his background?"

"He is an ex-Naval officer. He failed the Navy sight test, and the Admiralty passed him on to the Ministry of Education, who gave him a six months' course. I was informed that he was a brilliant mathematician, and on that recommendation I accepted him."

A knock on the door was followed by the entry of a cheerful young man with a weather-beaten face.

"Good evening, sir. You wanted to see me?"

"That is so, Marshall. Come in," the Head replied. He continued in a not unkindly tone, "After knocking it is customary to await permission before entering."

"Sorry, sir," Marshall replied, quite unabashed. "The Navy custom is to knock and enter in one action. I've yet to learn the drill ashore." With a friendly grin, he added, "I must compliment you on your inter-com telephone system, sir. They told me Ramsden was up to date, but I never imagined anything like this."

"It is good," the Head replied. "I told the contractors that I wanted to be able to speak to anyone, in any part of the school, at any time."

"It's up to R.N. standard, sir. That's the highest praise I know."

The two older men found Marshall's alert, direct

manner a trifle disconcerting, but not unattractive.

"How did you fare with the Sixth? Find them a trifle formidable?" Dr. Mansfield enquired.

"No, sir. These boys have the same trouble that all my cadets had. They're doing fairly advanced work, but are not sure of their figure drill. When I have taught them that, they'll do their work in half the time, with double the accuracy."

"That sounds promising," the Head admitted. "Providing I get results, I am prepared to leave the method to you."

The Head's study was not the only one in which Marshall's methods were being discussed. In Beetham four seniors were starting prep. in their study, which was a much prized corner room with windows in two walls.

The eldest of the four was Crew. Nearly eighteen, and stockily built, he was immensely strong. This was his last term.

"Are you going to do this adding and multiplying business, Crew?" Mortimer asked. He was sixteen, solid and sensible.

"He does not need to. Crew was the only one who was not clean bowled," Hamil, a long-faced Scots lad, put in.

"What about me? I gave him three answers," claimed red-headed O'Rory from County Cork.

"They were typically Irish, all wrong," Hamil retorted.

"Maybe," O'Rory agreed. "But I upheld the prestige of the Sixth. I was not struck dumb like the rest of ye."

Hamil said, "I do believe, Pat, that at Judgement Day, you will manage to line up with the angel Gabriel, as the only two sinless souls present. You always line up for the photograph of the winning team."

"Sure, and isn't that my native wit turning every defeat into a victory?"

"Your tongue does that, Pat, not your wit," retorted Crew. "This chap Marshall is a live wire," he continued. "I'm all for this adding up two columns at once. Grand idea."

"It was certainly very impressive," Hamil stated with Scotch reserve. "He has a mathematical brain. It remains to be seen whether he can teach us to do it. I had an idea from some of his remarks that he had been in the Navy."

"I think there's little doubt of it," O'Rory agreed.

Crew said, "Will you two foreigners subdue your natural instincts for chatter, and let the phlegmatic English get on with their job."

"Will we do it, Ham?" O'Rory queried. "Or will we start the term with a rough-house? Sure I've been practising my Ju Jitsu all the holidays. Foreigners indeed!"

O'Rory prepared to spring up, if Hamil showed any inclination to do likewise.

Crew grinned. He said, "Ever seen anything of unarmed combat? I'll show you some later. In the

meantime, dry up. I want to get out these figure combinations, and you'd better do the same."

Hamil said, "We'll humour him, Pat. It is his last term, and it might be dangerous to thwart him."

The four got down to their work. They were a happy quartet and had shared the study for over a year. Crew was a prefect, and head boy of Beetham. He could have had his own study, but preferred to continue in a companionship he found so congenial. His father, Admiral Crew, had imbued his son with the comradely spirit of the ward-room, and Crew was proud of having established this spirit in 'The Corner,' as they called their study. Actually it had permeated the whole house. Beetham was considered the happiest house in the school.

At eight o'clock, a bell rang and prep. was concluded. Shortly after the four had shelved their books, Crew called, "Come in," to a knock at the door, and Commer, the junior housemaster, entered.

"Good evening, Corner House," he said. "How is the Ju Jitsu going? May I sit down?"

"Yes, do, sir," invited Crew hospitably.

"Well, Pat, have you killed the gardener's boy yet?"

"No, sir, I haven't. He and my uncle have gone into partnership. My uncle bought him a book on Judo, and when I went to put a leg throw on him, begorrah, I couldn't shift him. The next thing I knew he had me on my back with a throw that he had out of this book. And what made it worse was my uncle laughing fit to bust himself."

"Bad luck! So you've dropped the Ju Jitsu?"

"In a way, sir. Now we're both doing Judo. I'm so good, Beetham is bound to win the rugger cup this term."

Commer laughed. "I refuse to see the connection, but we'll take it as read."

"What are the new boys like, sir?" asked Crew. "Anything promising?"

Commer shook his head. "No signs of anything out of the ordinary. I suppose you know that one of them, Denver, is the South African millionaire's son."

"He is the mining king, is he not?" Hamil queried. "Much more than that," Commer replied. "He is a second Cecil Rhodes. He has a finger in every pie in the Union."

Mortimer said, "If he has all that money, why isn't his son at Eton or Harrow?"

"It seems his father preferred a modern school. I understand he visited Eton and Harrow and did not like the old buildings, nor their clothes, nor their traditions."

"That's what I like to hear," Crew said. "Good for Ramsden. What's the boy like?"

"A quiet, decent little chap." Commer rose. "Well, I'll be going. Come along after morning school tomorrow, Crew, and we'll get out the teams for Saturday."

He went out to a quartet of 'good nights.'

"Not a bad old stick, Commer," was O'Rory's comment when the door had closed.

"He is not a bad chap at all," Hamil conceded, "but a bit too inquisitive in my opinion. He always asks

questions, but never leaves any information worth having when he has gone."

Mortimer, who saw much but said little, put forward the explanation. "It's part of his job. Coming in to yarn with us is his idea of master and boys being pally together. He thinks he is getting inside information on the feeling of the house. I'll bet, in the masters' common room, he throws it around, 'Well, in Beetham we think this; in Beetham the boys think that.' He is just boosting himself up as a good mixer."

"You're being a bit hard on old Commer. He means well," Crew said.

"He means well for himself," Mortimer replied, "but not for us." Then he changed the subject. "What about this 'unarmed combat,' Crew? I know it is the training they give the Commandos, but that is all I do know."

O'Rory dropped the book he was reading and sprang up. "Now you're talking. Tip the table up and let's see if your Commando combat stuff will stand up to Judo."

The table was upended against the wall, leaving a clear space for demonstrating.

Crew explained, "This Commando training includes all the quick ways of putting a man out, killing him silently, disarming him and so forth. We had a two-and-a-half down for a weekend. He was very hot and showed me a lot. This is the sort of thing——"

"What is a two-and-a-half, a lieutenant commander?" Hamil asked.

"That's right," Crew confirmed. "First of all, I'll

show you the quickest ways of putting a man out. Pat, you're the man. Don't start any Judo. We'll go through slow motion first."

While these demonstrations were taking place, Commer was striding along the country road that led to Werley, the village a mile from the school, whose station formed the main link between Ramsden and the outside world. His object was to visit the Blue Anchor inn and listen to local gossip. He had an intensely inquisitive nature. Nothing gave him greater satisfaction than the knowledge that he knew more about local events than anyone else in the school.

"Good evening, Mr. Commer," the landlord greeted him.

"Evening, Henry," Commer replied. "My usual, please."

A half-pint of bitter and a two-ounce packet of tobacco were placed in front of him. He smiled at two or three of the locals as they greeted him, but his interest centred on a stranger, also at the bar. He was a tall, sunburned man, with black hair, bushy eyebrows and a long, thin face, with a large, straight nose. Seeing Commer regarding the stranger, Henry said,

"This gentleman has taken the Grange, Mr. Commer." He turned to the stranger. "I didn't get your name, sir."

"My name is Greatorex." The man spoke slowly, in a rather deep voice.

"You might like to meet a neighbour, sir. This is Mr. Commer, a master at Ramsden College."

The man looked at Commer with hard, black eyes. He smiled, revealing large, white teeth.

"I am pleased to meet you, sir."

He held out his hand, and Commer shook it, receiving the impression of great strength, although the man's grip was gentle enough.

"You will drink with me," Greatorrex said. He tossed off the whisky he was drinking, and turned to the landlord. "Another, and what this gentleman wishes."

They picked up their glasses and moved to a big, old-fashioned settle that was vacant.

"I am interested in the College," Greatorrex said, after a few minutes' conversation, "I may send my boy there."

"I am sure the headmaster would be delighted. It is a very good school. Very modern. Are you coming to live at the Grange permanently?"

"It is possible. At the moment I have only rented it, but if I like it here, I shall buy the place. How many boys have you at the school?"

Commer told him that there were four houses with roughly a hundred boys in each, but there was room for another fifty in each house. Then he asked a question. "The Grange is not one of our big country houses, but it is a fair size. How will you manage for staff?"

Greatorrex pursed his lips. "I have not seriously considered that yet. At the moment I have three men with me, a valet, a cook and a chauffeur."

Commer suggested that it would be a good idea to

come and see the headmaster if Greatorex thought of sending his son to Ramsden.

Greatorex replied, "Thank you, but I should prefer to see the school incognito. I wonder if you would permit me to come as a friend of yours. I understand that Sir Harry Denver's son is at the school. Do you know which house he is in?"

"Oh yes. He is in my house. Come and visit the school as a friend of mine by all means."

They continued talking and finally Greatorex invited Commer to have dinner at the Grange the next evening.

The following evening, the master presented himself at the arched entrance of the Grange and rang the bell. A short, broad man, with a round head and a slit of a mouth, and dressed in a dark, double-breasted suit, opened the door.

"I think Mr. Greatorex is expecting me. Commer is the name."

"Yes, sir. Come in. This way, please."

The man took his hat and placed it on an old oak chest. Commer felt at once the quiet, peaceful atmosphere. He noted the Persian rugs on the polished floor, the ancient portraits on the oak-panelled walls, the solid, carved furniture, made by craftsmen centuries before, the feeling of a permanence unaffected by time.

"This way, sir."

Commer followed the man to a door at the far end of the great hall.

"Mr. Commer," the man announced, as he opened the door of a large, oak-panelled library.

Greatorex rose from an easy chair.

"Hullo. I am pleased to see that school duties did not prevent you from coming. Let us have a short drink, then we will have dinner."

"I have never been inside this house before," Commer remarked. "The house has been empty for so long, I should have expected mildew and damp."

Greatorex explained, "Apparently it belongs to a Naval captain, who, for some reason, never lives here. But he has a pensioned Naval man and his wife as caretakers. They live in the cottage at the entrance. I imagine the man's training in the Navy is responsible for the spick and span maintenance of the place. I have yet to learn the history of the house. To me, as an engineer, the thickness of its walls is one of its mysteries."

"Probably full of hidden passages," Commer suggested.

"That is a possibility I had considered, but so far I have discovered no sign of them."

The man who had admitted Commer served the dinner, which was beautifully cooked. Later, when the visitor left, after what he had to admit had been a very pleasant evening, he found that his knowledge of the man Greatorex was still practically nothing. He was an engineer and obviously rich. He had taken the Grange because he wanted to be undisturbed while he concentrated on a new invention, and also because he might send his son to Ramsden. However, with a little embroidery, Commer felt he would be able to make some exciting announcements in the common room.

He had promised to show Greatorex round the school at four o'clock the following day.

The next day was Friday, and punctually at four o'clock a beautiful saloon car drew up in front of Beetham, and Greatorex alighted. Commer had left word that a friend would be coming, and the maid showed the visitor up to the master's room and asked him to wait. As soon as the door had closed behind her, Greatorex went to the window which looked out over Beetham's playground to the school playing fields in the distance. He was wearing a double-breasted tweed suit, and a pair of binoculars hung from his neck, but they were inconspicuous inside the front of his jacket. He took them out and studied the distant playing fields and the thick hedge surrounding the school grounds. When Commer entered the room, he was turning away from the window.

"You have magnificent playing fields. Does that thick hedge go right round the school?"

Commer said that it did and ensured complete privacy for all the school activities. He added, "Now what would you like to see?"

"If it is convenient, I should like to see the kind of things the boys are doing, now that school has finished."

"Very well, we will walk round."

Boys were everywhere, in the corridors, in the playground, but the bulk of them were in the large Beetham common room. A glass partition enabled Greatorex and Commer to view the activity within.

The master pointed to a boy ~~who had~~ just got

up from a table to go to his locker. "That's young Denver," he announced, and added, "We felt very honoured when Beetham was selected as the house most suitable for him."

"The headmaster must have a high opinion of you," Greatorex said with a smile.

Mr. Commer replied with a self-satisfied air, "I imagine that was one reason for his decision. Would you like to see the dormitories?"

"Yes, I should like to see where the boys sleep. I suppose young Denver has a room to himself."

"Oh dear, no. He receives the same treatment as every other boy. We have no favourites."

They made their way upstairs to a dormitory, a long, airy room, with ten beds a side, widely spaced, with a locker between each bed. Greatorex strolled towards the tall window at the far end. As he was passing the fourth bed from the window, on the same side as the entrance door, Mr. Commer pointed to it.

"That is young Denver's bed. No different from any of the others, is it?"

Greatorex agreed and looked up at the window, then went to it, raised the lower half and looked out. He said, "I suppose the window is open at night. Or would the boys in the near beds feel a draught?"

"I do not think so," Mr. Commer asserted. "The window is open at the top and a little at the bottom. You may be quite sure, if any boy complained of a draught, his complaint would not be ignored."

This assurance appeared to satisfy Greatorex, who had in fact learned all that he had come to the school

to discover. He expressed his gratitude to the master for showing him round the house.

"The boys seem pretty comfortable here, and from what I have seen of them, they look contented enough. I should be very happy to feel that my boy was at school in such a pleasant atmosphere. And now I must not take up any more of your time. But I trust," he continued with a friendly smile, "we shall see more of one another in the near future, when my son becomes a pupil at Ramsden College."

They returned to the entrance where the large black car was waiting, with the chauffeur sitting patiently at the wheel. As Greatorrex approached, he got out to open the door for his employer, standing in respectful silence while he bade farewell to his host.

Greatorrex settled himself in the back seat and gave a nod to the driver who took the wheel again, and the car purred silently off down the drive.

Once they were clear of the school gates, the chauffeur's respectful manner underwent a remarkable change. He relaxed, flung off his livery cap and turned to his employer with a knowing wink.

"Did you case the joint O.K.?" he asked.

"I have seen everything I needed," Greatorrex replied.



CHAPTER TWO

The Hole in the Ground

ON Sunday evening at supper, Crew, Mortimer, Hamil and O'Rory were all suffering from suppressed excitement.

In the fashion of school 'grape-vines,' word got round that something was brewing in 'The Corner,' so that in due course Mr. Commer learned of it, and decided that he would visit the four boys that evening and find out what they were up to. When he arrived, he found them in earnest conversation.

"Hullo," he said. "Am I intruding on some profound discussion?"

"Profound discussion, sir, but you are not intruding," Crew replied. "It's top secret, but I know we can trust you."

"You can do that, Crew, but if it is something that Mr. Moore ought to know, I am afraid it would be my duty to tell him, so you have been warned. If, after that, you prefer not to disclose the secret, I shall not complain."

Crew looked round at the others before replying. He guessed from their expressions that they felt as he did.

"Well, sir, please don't think that we're trying to wear captains' rings before we're lieutenants, but after what you have just said, I think it would be better if we discussed it a bit more before we let you into the secret."

"I suppose it is unnecessary for me to ask if it is something outside the school rules?" Commer enquired.

"I think that is a very necessary question on your part, sir, but I can assure you that, at the moment, it is not."

Commer smiled. "Very well, I'll leave it at that. If it does develop into something that might get out of control, I think you would be wise to confide in me before you get out of your depth."

"We'll do that, sir. We won't spoil our good name."

Commer smiled again and bade them good night. When the door had closed behind him, Crew said,

"Now, let's have it from the beginning. If you two could have seen yourselves when you stumbled in here just before the supper bell! I thought you'd committed murder at least. Pat burbling, 'I won't sleep a wink tonight'; Ham blathering, 'Now I know what it feels like to see a ghost.' It was only when you spoke of the

secret passage that I understood why you were in such a state. How nobody noticed it at supper beats me. Never mind. Start from the beginning. You begin, Ham. Pat will supply thunder and lightning as we go along."

Hamil began. "Pat and I signed out for Werley and the Salisbury road. We had decided to make for the Grange park. We were nearly there, I suppose a couple of miles beyond Werley, and watching a jet flying quite low, just overhead, when something whizzed down. It must have come from the jet and plonked into a great clump of bushes. Of course, Pat took it into his head to go for it."

"And why not indeed?" O'Rory interrupted. "It might have been the pilot's watch, or a pair of binoculars, and if I had found it and returned it, I might have made friends with a pilot at the airfield and got taken up in his plane."

"This is England, Pat, not Ireland. In this country, R.A.F. pilots are not allowed to take up civilians. In any case, no watch or binoculars would be worth returning after a drop like that."

"Exactly what I told him," Hamil continued, "but into the bushes he went. Well, I waited and waited, and at last I went after the mad Irishman. The farther I went in, the thicker the bushes became, and I kept on calling. Then, most unexpectedly, Pat's voice came from the ground in front of me——"

"Sure, I'd been calling ye for ages," O'Rory stated. Then he continued to the others, "I was going along and, being unable to find the thing that had fallen

from the jet, I was turning round to go back, when the ground went from under my feet and I fell through a rotten old trapdoor that had grass growing on it. For a moment it flashed through my mind that I was dropping into some old well. Then I stopped suddenly, and I could just reach the hole through which I had fallen, so I gave a wee jump and caught the edge, to pull myself out, but it broke away in my hand. Thinks I, I'm in a bit of a jam. 'Twas dark inside, so I took out my torch——"

Hamil interrupted, "You may be sure that Pat would have a torch with him on a fine Sunday afternoon's walk."

"And where would we have been if I'd not had my torch?" Pat retorted. "Let's have no more of this talk about my carrying a lot of unnecessary articles. I believe in having things with me in case the unexpected happens . . ."

"All right," Crew broke in. "We'll admit your radar works and your guns are loaded, even in harbour. Now, carry on."

Pat grinned. "So, I look round, and what do I see? The place I'm in is not round like a well, but square, with the sides built of stone. There's some old rotted bits of wood on the ground. It might have been a ladder. But what catches my eye is a square hole in one wall, just big enough for a man to get through. So I say to myself, 'This needs looking into.' I lean inside and flash my torch and I'm looking down some steps into an underground passage. I climb in, and it would have been difficult, but for a couple of rusted

iron staples in the wall each side for a hand-hold. I go along a few steps, then I think, "I'll let Ham into this too, he'll enjoy it'."

"You had the wind up, Pat. You wanted Ham as moral support," Mortimer put in.

"'Twas nothing of the sort. I knew Ham would be getting worried at me being away so long——"

"Anyway," Hamil cut in, "he got me down into the hole. As a matter of fact, I fell in too. I was looking down into the hole to see where Pat's voice was coming from, when the cover gave way and I fell in on top of Pat. He was all for beginning the exploration right away, but first of all, I told him, we ought to make sure we could get out. So he took me on his shoulders and I broke away all the rotten wood of the cover till I got to firm earth on one side. Then I climbed out and pulled Pat up."

"All a waste of time," Pat said, "this Scots caution. Even then he made me tie the torch to a buttonhole in case I dropped it."

"I had no fancy to be there without a light," Hamil continued. "Well, we went along this passage. It was pretty straight and quite level, but narrow. The walls and roof were of rough stone. The only uncomfortable thing was the height, about five feet six; we had to keep our heads bent all the time."

"What was the air like?" Crew asked.

"A bit musty. Well, we went on, and then I became conscious of a kind of foreboding, a feeling of apprehension. At first I put it down to the silence——"

"Sure the silence was like a weight on your mind,"

Pat broke in. "And the closeness of the walls, and the roof so low, I began to think the roof was coming down on top of me."

"Claustrophobia," Mortimer commented.

"Whatever it was, the phobia was reaching hands inside me and taking hold of my innards. I know I'm a bit sensitive. All Irishmen are——"

"Sense-less, Pat," Crew corrected, and they all laughed, which relieved the tension. For a moment there was silence. Then Crew said,

"Go on, man, you've got us all worked up."

Hamil continued. "I had the strangest feeling that something was watching us and waiting ahead. Then Pat turned the torch round and asked me if I was feeling all right. I had not been too bad as long as the torch lit the passage ahead, and I could see it, but when Pat turned the torch round, I knew that some terror was only waiting this chance to fly at us out of the blackness. I shouted, 'Turn the torch round.' I didn't know I was shouting till the sound shocked me, and then I was all in a sweat. I said to Pat, 'I don't like it. I vote we go back.' But Pat became obstinate. You know what a mule he is once an idea gets into his mind. He said, 'Neither devil nor devil's creature is going to stop me,' and he went on, so I had to follow. Soon we came to a square chamber, and the feeling of being watched was terrifying. I felt the hair of my head rising. Then Pat did a funny thing. He crossed himself and began saying one of his Latin prayers, and, believe it or not, chaps, my fears just went away. It was the weirdest experience I have ever had."

"I was frightened out of my life," Pat confessed. "Without thinking what I was doing, I found myself praying. After that I felt all right, so we went on. There was nothing in that room but a post sticking up in the middle, and the passage went on the other side. So in we went. I felt we must have walked miles, and I couldn't imagine where we were coming to. But at last we came to some steps. 'Aha,' thinks I, 'now we'll be coming to the air again, and I won't be sorry, and wherever it is, we'll walk back above ground.' But never a bit. There was a trapdoor or something similar at the top of the steps, and never a budge could we get out of it."

"That was why we were so late," Hamil took up the tale. "This crazy galoot was looking for secret springs and bell-pushes to lift the trap. Then suddenly we realised that there is a limit to the life of a battery. The torch began to dim. And it was only the thought of retracing our steps in the darkness without a torch that made Pat give up the search and start back."

"The journey back was a nightmare," Pat stated. "Ye see, I had to save the torch for when we came to that little square room. So I felt my way along with one hand on the wall and one out in front of me, all in the pitchest black you ever saw, for I dared not use the torch. We went on and on till I began to think there must be another passage and we'd taken a turning somewhere."

"It was the most frightening experience," Hamil asserted. "I began to think of things like being buried alive. I was holding the tail of Pat's coat, and then my

back began to ache through stooping for so long. And the knowledge that I could not raise my head made the ache in my back sheer agony, till I told Pat that we must sit down, so that we could straighten our backs. But he wouldn't——"

"Of course I would not," Pat explained. "I remembered reading somewhere that in such circumstances, to sit down is madness. You must keep going. If you sit down, you first go numb, there's no pain——"

"You were not trudging through snow in a blizzard, Pat," Mortimer remarked.

"Ah no, of course, that's when ye mustn't sit down or ye'll freeze to death. Never mind, the thought kept us on the move, and suddenly my wall hand felt nothing, and I switched on the torch, a pale glimmer, but a searchlight in the darkness we'd become accustomed to, and there was the wee square room with the post in the middle——"

"And the strange thing was we had felt none of the apprehension we felt when we first came to that room," Hamil said. "But, after we had——"

"Wait," Pat cried. "Let me tell it, Ham, ... I was so overjoyed, for I knew the passage the other side was only a short one, that I gave a good old tug at the post in the middle. And then I had the feeling that someone was after me, and I had to get out as fast as my legs would carry me. 'Come on,' I shouted, and Ham and I hared down the passage as though the devil himself was after us, and truly I think he was, for that was the feeling I had."

"I had it too," Hamil said. "And it was worse for me, because I was behind."

"Once we were in the daylight, the feeling went and we couldn't stop laughing at the thought of us scuttling down the hole like a pair of frightened rabbits."

"But we stopped laughing when we saw the time by my watch, and knew we'd missed roll call. How was it we weren't booked?" Hamil asked.

Mortimer answered him. "You can thank Crewee for that. When we knew you two were late, he told me to take roll call, and I omitted your names from the call over, so no one noticed. But when it was nearly six and you two had not turned up, I don't mind telling you that I was beginning to sweat, and so was Crewee, although I'd agreed to take the knock."

"That was good of you," Pat said. Now he was no longer excited by the narration of the story, he relapsed into what he called his English dialect. "If ever they have a three-mile race at the sports, I'm entering for it. I never imagined I could cover three miles so fast. But the thing I'm still wondering is what it could have been that dropped from that jet."

"You start wondering what we are going to do about this infernal discovery of yours," Crew suggested. "It has nearly spoiled our good name already. I don't deny the excitement of knowing about an underground passage, but we can't tell anybody else, so we lose half the fun of knowing about it. I can't say that I believe in the occult, but supposing some of our youngsters found their way down there. If they experienced the feeling you got, they'd be frightened out of their wits."

Frankly, I think we ought to tell Moore, and get the place blocked up."

"Not before we have seen it, Crew," was Mortimer's slow remark.

Crew grinned. "That's the only thing holding me back," he admitted.

"Sure it is, Crew," O'Rory pleaded. "Why, you couldn't let a chance like this go. Imagine it, we four know of a hidden passage that nobody else in the country knows about. This place must be explored before we let anyone else in on it. We have to get that trap open at the top of the steps. There's not the least chance of any of the kids finding it."

Crew laughed. "Turn off the record, Pat. This is a four-corner affair. We know what's in your corner, let's hear what's in the others."

Mortimer said, "The one point that interests this corner, which none of you have mentioned beyond the mere stating of the facts, is the cause of your fears as you approached the chamber. I should like to find out if it's a form of claustrophobia—you know, the fear of being shut in an enclosed space—or something spooky, worth reporting to the Society of Psychical Research."

Mortimer was the son of a well-known scientist, and at times spoke like one.

Crew said, "That's the Professor's corner. What about you, Ham?"

"This corner squares up with the other two. What about the fourth corner?"

Crew thought for a moment. "I won't leave it a triangle," he said. "I'll make it a square, until we've

investigated it together. Question is, when? The best plan will be Wednesday or Saturday, if it's wet, and next Sunday in any case. If it's Wednesday or Saturday, we can get a late pass, then we needn't be back till the supper bell. How's that?"

"Fine," the others agreed.

The following Wednesday dawned grey with heavy rain clouds, and by noon a steady drizzle had set in. After school Toms, the games captain, pinned up a notice on the games board, "All games cancelled." For such occasions there were alternative programmes for indoor occupations; with table tennis and chess tournaments, gym classes, the Dramatic Society beginning its preparations for the end of term play, and a full quota for the swimming baths, the school became a hive of activity after lunch. Seniors, not occupied in organising any of these activities, were permitted to visit nearby places and were granted late passes. Crew obtained four from Mr. Commer.

"Does this mean an expedition in connection with the secret?" Commer enquired.

"That's right, sir. Perhaps we shall have some news for you when we come back."

The four set out for Werley. Pat was carrying a small canvas holdall which had already occasioned considerable comment. He had refused to divulge its contents.

"Look, Pat," said Crew. "Either tell us what that burglar's outfit consists of, or else drop behind and look as though you didn't belong to this party. We

don't mind if you're arrested on suspicion, but we'd like to keep our own crime sheets clean."

"Did you ever read *The Swiss Family Robinson*?" Pat retorted.

Crew and Hamil had read it, but not Mortimer.

"Well, do you remember the bag Mrs. Robinson had, and the way she produced from it, time and again, some essential thing, which nobody else had thought of bringing away from the wreck, but which always saved the situation? Well, that's what's in this bag."

Hamil said, "Then I'll trouble you for a button and needle and thread, Mrs. Robinson. The bottom button is missing from my raincoat, and my knees are getting wet."

"I can't help with the button, Ham, but I've a hammer here. I'll knock your knees flat, then they won't get wet," Pat replied.

Mortimer said, "If the level of this conversation descends any lower, we shall get our chins wet."

"Thanks, Mort," Crew remarked. "I was beginning to wonder if I'd come out with a couple of juniors by mistake. But, seriously, Pat, we can't do any breaking in. I had a look at a road map this morning, and it's clear as a pikestaff that the steps you came to lead up into the Grange. There's nothing else within a mile where an underground passage could lead."

"Why, of course. Why didn't I think of that myself? It's just the old place that would have secret passages. But just imagine, we've been walking these parts for years and never thought of looking for one. I wonder, does the owner know about it?"

Various suggestions brought them to Werley, where they purchased four spare batteries, as Mortimer had also brought a torch. For two miles beyond the village they trudged through the rain with only odd remarks for conversation. At last Hamil stated that they had arrived at the spot. Pat climbed through the hedge into a thinly treed wood with a good deal of undergrowth. The others followed.

"We're going to be pretty wet round the feet by the time we get back," Crew remarked. "I hope it's going to be worth it." He looked at his watch. "It's three o'clock now. We left at two. That means we must be on the road again not later than five. That gives us two hours to explore."

It was a slippery, wet business forcing their way through the brambles and undergrowth to the spot where Pat announced that he had arrived at the hole. They all stood round, looking down into an uninteresting pit, still very much concealed by brambles, despite Pat's and Hamil's climbing in and out. One by one they descended and squelched into a bottom turned into a morass by the rain. Spirits had been at a low ebb when they stood looking down into the cavity, but the sight of the square opening, beyond which lay mystery, acted as a spur to the imagination, and excitement began to rise.

"Go ahead, Pat. In you go," Crew whispered.

O'Rory handed the bag to Hamil and climbed through the opening. Then he took the bag and switched on his torch while the others followed.

"O.K., here we go," Pat said, and with heads bowed,

they set off behind him. The outstanding sound breaking the heavy silence was the rustle of Hamil's mackintosh. After the trudge through the rain, the still air in the passage seemed dry and mild. Crew and Mortimer were eagerly awaiting the feelings of apprehension described by Pat and Hamil, but they arrived at the square chamber without having experienced any qualms. Pat flashed his torch on the stake, and would have stopped to examine it, but Crew, who was last, told him to get on and not waste time. So on they went.

The intense darkness behind Pat's torchlight was uncanny. No one spoke. Crew was busy counting his steps. When they finally stopped, and Pat's torch revealed the stone stairs, Crew announced,

"Seventy-eight steps to the chamber, and five hundred and ninety-three to here. Now, let's have a look at this trapdoor of yours."

The steps were so narrow that there was only room for two at a time on them, and even that was a squeeze which restricted movement.

"Give me your torch, Mort," Crew said, and squeezing by he climbed the steps beside Pat, who was standing halfway up. He examined the square above with his torch.

"This is no trapdoor," he remarked. "It's solid stone and smooth as glass. As a matter of fact it's two stones. I wonder if they open up on hinges like a trap. Give Ham your torch, Pat, and shove up on this far stone with me. Keep the torch on the edges, Ham."

They pushed with all their might without result. The steps led right up to the square in the roof, and

they were standing halfway up the steps, pushing with their hands above their heads.

"Wait a minute," Crew said. "You go down, Pat, and let me get up the steps and get my back to it. Then I can get some real pressure on."

Pat went down, and Crew climbed higher up the stair. At the fourth step from the top he was standing sideways and bending down. He hunched his shoulders against the slab above and heaved upwards.

"It moved, it moved!" Hamil exclaimed.

Crew relaxed. "I couldn't feel anything give," he said.

"Definitely, that crack at the side widened," Hamil stated excitedly. "I had my torch on it."

"All right, I'll have another shot."

Crew shifted his position slightly, got his shoulders to the slab and heaved again.

Two torches and three pairs of eyes were on the crack. When Crew heaved, three exclamations broke out. Crew's hands were against the wall, and he must have pushed himself over a trifle as he made a final effort on hearing the exclamations. Whatever movement he had made must have been partly sideways, for a horizontal crack an inch wide had appeared. The slab he had been pushing had moved an inch to the right.

"A torch, quick," he cried.

Mortimer handed up his torch and Crew stepped down a couple of steps and examined the edge of the stone he had moved.

"This doesn't lift up, it slides sideways," he said. "There's a tiny ridge along the end of the stone, less

than a quarter of an inch, and it must fit into a slot along the top of the wall stone. Very clever. You can't slide this stone till you've lifted it up a quarter of an inch. Now, let's see if it will slide."

Grasping the edge of the stone he pulled and the heavy slab slid with a soft grating sound into the right-hand wall.

"What a trick!" Hamil exclaimed.

"Look up there," O'Rory cried, directing his torch up through the dark space above. They could see the roof of another passage. "Begorrah, we're there. Come on, let's get up."

"Wait a minute," Crew said. "Let's see if the other slab works the same way."

He passed the torch down and went up the steps, and, with a hand on each wall to steady himself, heaved up and sideways against the second slab. It worked, and he slid the stone into its socket in the opposite wall. Now there was a square, three feet by three, with impenetrable blackness above.

Crew took a torch and went up first. When they were all up, they saw that they were in a long, straight passage, between stone walls and with a stone floor. The roof was high above their heads.

Mortimer spoke for the first time.

"Obviously, the walls of the house are double, at least this one is. The floor must be level with the floors of the rooms on the ground floor. The height will be the height of the rooms, and the ceiling the same height as the ceilings of the rooms. How could they have built a place like this without everyone being aware of the

secret passage, and if it was generally known, how could the secret die?"

"Never mind, Mort," O'Rory said. "The secret is no longer dead. We have brought it back to life, but we don't know yet what it is we have resurrected, so the sooner we explore the better. You and Crewee go that way and Ham and I will try this way."

"Not a hope, Pat. We all keep together," Crew decided. "Come on. I don't suppose we can be heard, but tread softly."

He led the way along the passage, which was no wider than the underground way by which they had come. They had not taken many steps, when the torch revealed a narrow ramp, not more than a foot wide, sloping up the wall to their left, and ending in a narrow platform, the same width as the ramp. Crew went up and Pat followed. The ascent required a delicate balance, so that they were literally hugging the wall.

"This can only be an observation platform," whispered Crew.

Very gingerly he moved the light of the torch over the surface of the wall, and saw what he was looking for at eye level; two square knobs on a narrow length of stone, and beyond, a long slot into which the stone obviously slid. Grasping the knobs, he pushed sideways and the whole length of stone moved into the slot.

For a moment they were slightly dazzled by the daylight from two tall windows at the left end of the room into which they were looking. The gap left by the slab Crew had pushed along was behind some delicate stone

tracery work high up in the wall of the room, which appeared to be a library, panelled in oak from top to bottom. As soon as Crew slid the panel back, voices could be heard, and they could see two men sitting in easy chairs, with drinks on a table between them.

From the tone of their voices it was obvious to the two watchers that they had been arguing for some time.





CHAPTER THREE

The Priest's Hole

THE first words Crew and Pat heard were :

“—and I think it's madness. They're bound to trace it to you. As soon as he gets the lad back, he'll leave no stone unturned to get you.”

One of the men stood up. He was tall, with black hair. An expression of diabolical hatred appeared on his face, as he almost hissed out,

“Did I say he would get him back? I have waited fifteen years for this moment. The money that started him was made out of my first invention. Then, while I was in England, he married the girl I should have married. I have never forgiven him, and now I am going to make him suffer.”

The man sitting down replied, "But if they get you, and you get jugged, what satisfaction do you get? You're only hurting yourself."

The tall man laughed and took a step up and down.

"I shall not go to prison. I have laid my plans too carefully. No one knows where I am. I am supposed to be in London. I go to London twice a week to show myself."

"Well, I don't like it," the other replied.

His companion turned on him and snapped, "You are not asked to like it. You will do as you are told, or else——"

He stopped, but the other man must have been aware of what was implied in the unspoken threat, for he said,

"All right, all right. You're the boss."

"As you say, I am the boss, and do not make any mistake about the plane tomorrow morning. See that you are in Jo'burg by Saturday."

"I shall want more money."

"I will give it you now. Come."

The tall man led the way out of the room and the other followed.

For a moment, Crew and Pat continued looking through the aperture. They were both trying to grasp the significance of what they had heard.

Crew said, "What did you make of that, Pat?"

"All I can say is, old Shakespeare knew what he was talking about when he said, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' "

A whisper came up to them from Hamil. "What is there to see? Come down and let us have a look."

"Coming now," Crew replied.

He and Pat cautiously made their way down the ramp.

"What did you see? We could hear voices. Who was it?"

"Go up and have a look," Crew said. "There were two men there, but they've gone now. We'll tell you what they were talking about when you come down. Take the torches."

Hamil went up, followed by Mortimer. The two below looked up at the pale light that cut into the blackness of the passage from the slot.

"I could make neither head nor tail of it," Pat said. "They're planning something for which one of them may go to prison, but he doesn't think he will."

"Wait a minute," Crew insisted. "Let's make sure of what they said while it's fresh in our minds. The first thing we heard was the chap who thought it was madness. He said, as soon as someone or other gets the lad back, he'd leave no stone unturned to get the tall one."

"That's right. Sounded like gangsters planning to get someone in another gang."

"Keep your mind on what they said, Pat. You only cloud your memory by these comparisons. Then the other said he'd waited fifteen years for this moment."

"No, Crew. Before that he said, 'Did I say he would get him back?'"

"Yes, that's correct. Now we're getting somewhere. The next bit is easy. I remember thinking it was like

a Victorian novel. Someone made his money out of the tall chap's invention and married his girl, and the tall chap's never forgiven him and is going to make him suffer."

"That's right. That's what he said. Then the sitting-down one said if the tall one got jugged, what good would it do him? He'd only be hurting himself."

"Good, we're getting somewhere now. And the tall one said he wouldn't go to prison, as he had laid his plans carefully. He was supposed to be in London."

"And nobody knew he was here," Pat continued. "And he went up twice a week to show himself. And the other one said he didn't like it, and the tall fellow turned on him like a Kilkenny cat and said he wasn't asked to like it and he'd do as he was told."

"You've got it, and the other said, 'All right, you're the boss'."

"And the boss told him to be sure and be on a plane tomorrow and be in Jo'burg by Saturday. Then the boss went off to give the other one some money. 'Twas a grand idea of yours to repeat it. Now we have every word in our minds."

"Yes, but what does it mean? That's the question," Crew queried.

As he said this, Mortimer and Hamil had arrived back. The light no longer shone in from above, as they had closed the slot.

"Did you realise why there was no panelling over the viewing gap?" Mortimer asked.

"No, I never thought of that," Crew said. "I was too interested in what the men were saying."

"It was a coat of arms. A brilliant idea. A viewing gap in the panelling would have been so conspicuous. But why go to such trouble, when you are building a house, for the sole purpose of spying? That is what puzzles me. I——"

"Listen, Professor," Crew interrupted. "That's nothing to what'll puzzle you when you hear what the two chaps in there were talking about."

"Really? What were they saying?"

"I don't want to seem mysterious, but that'll keep. What we have to decide now, is what we're going to do next. Let's have the torch and see what time it is." He flashed the torch on his wrist watch. "Five minutes past four. Say we give this another ten minutes. If we get away by four-fifteen, we should do it comfortably."

He started to walk on, when Pat said,

"Wait, Crew. Before we go on let's make sure the hole we came up is still there. You never know, it may have closed up. There's something weird about this place."

"You're letting your imagination run away with you, Pat. Come on."

Crew set off again, but Hamil said, "Wait, Crew. The mad Irishman has gone back to see if the hole is still there."

Before Crew could reply, Pat was calling softly,

"Come here. There's a door this end."

They set off, stepping carefully over the hole through which they had arrived. Sure enough, Pat's torch revealed a heavily studded door, with a circular wooden disc where the handle should be. Pat was

examining the disc. He pressed hard against it. Then he got his fingers behind it, as it was half an inch free from the door, and pulled, but without result.

Mortimer said, "It is usual to turn a door handle."

Pat handed his torch to Hamil and, with all his fingers on the disc, turned it with little trouble. A slight creaking accompanied the movement. But the door remained closed. Again he got his fingers behind and pulled, and, with barely a sound, the heavy door swung open. It must have been six inches thick. The inside face was covered with panelling, and in the centre of each panel was a round disc similar to the one on the outside, but not raised and free from the door as the outside one was. They pulled the door wide open, and the two torches revealed a chamber, perhaps eight feet long, and the same width as the passage, just over three feet. The walls and roof were panelled in similar manner to the panelling on the door.

"Well, I'll be blowed, a secret chamber," Crew exclaimed.

"And do you notice that when the door is closed it would be impossible to say where it was, from the inside," Mortimer pointed out. "The edges come exactly where the edges of each line of panels come. And one of these discs is the handle, but you would have to know which disc it was before you could open the door. That's why there is a disc in each panel, all round the room, in order to deceive anyone not acquainted with the secret. Very clever."

"Sure, you're the clever one, Mort," Pat said. He selected the disc opposite the one on the outside, and

with his fingers flat on it, turned it slowly round. An enormous wooden tongue descended from the side of the door. Mortimer flashed his torch on to the jamb opposite, where the tongue would fall, and there was the slot to receive it.

Hamil remarked, "I am thinking that there must be another door. What would be the use of this one only. I think there should be a door leading into the room that we looked into. It would be on this wall to the right." •

"Ye know, we're a complete brains trust this afternoon," Pat remarked. "That's the answer to what's been worrying me, why they made this room when they couldn't get into it from the house. And, of course, one of these discs'll be the handle."

By this time, Mortimer, Hamil and Pat were in the chamber. Crew remained outside in the passage, the thought in his mind, "If they get shut in that room, I shall be able to let them out."

Meanwhile, Pat was trying disc after disc in the right-hand wall. All at once he exclaimed,

"Begorrah, this is it."

He had found a disc that turned and he slowly rotated it. Then he pushed, but nothing happened.

Mortimer said, "Try these knobs. There are two knobs, apparently part of the wall design, near the end of each wall. I think their intention is to mislead. I should think the two at this end, near the disc you have turned, may open the door."

Pat grasped the knobs and pulled. A door began to swing open, and immediately voices were audible. Pat gently pushed the door to again.

"Phew! That was near. I have the feeling that tall fellow could be pretty tough."

"What do you mean? What tall fellow?" Mortimer asked.

Crew came into the chamber. "Cut the cackle, chaps. Give me a torch quick. I'd forgotten all about the time."

Hamil handed over his torch, and Crew looked at his watch.

"My goodness! Half-past four. Come along. We can't afford to be late."

"But, Crewce," Pat exclaimed, "We found another door."

"I know. I was watching. Don't talk now. All we have to think about is getting back. Plenty of time to talk then."

Hurriedly they left the chamber and closed the door into the passage, turning the outside disc to lock it. Crew stood by the exit into the underground passage while the other three descended. Then he followed and slid the two slabs across to close the exit, and lifted them into their locking position. With Pat leading, they made their way at the best speed possible along the passage. No one spoke, and they all felt the oppressive silence of the subterranean atmosphere. They must have covered half the distance to the square chamber with the stake in the middle, when Pat slowed up and stopped.

"Pass your torch along, Mort. Mine is getting very dim," he said.

"Here you are...Hullo, it won't go on. We'd better put in new batteries. Mine was going rather dim."

"O.K., who has my bag? Let's have it."

For a moment no one spoke.

"Come on, chaps. Who's got the bag?" Crew said.

Three denials greeted his remark, and at this moment Pat's torch went out.

"Now we've done it properly," Crew's voice announced in the darkness. "Who had the bag last?"

"Aw, 'twas me," Pat's voice replied. "I remember I took it into the wee room, and we left in that much of a hurry, I forgot to pick it up. There's only one thing for it. I'll go back for it."

"No, Pat, that would never do. We must not be separated." Crew decided. "The only thing is to go on, like you and Ham did, holding each other's tails. Don't start till I give the word. Now, are you each holding the coat of the one in front? Right. Go ahead, Pat."

They started slowly, but after a little Pat managed to increase their speed, although it was slow progress.

"Isn't this darkness horrible," said Mortimer's voice. "I almost feel I can't breathe."

Hamil's voice replied, "That is curious. I have the same feeling."

"Take hold of yourselves. Don't get panicky. Of course you can breathe," said Crew decisively.

Again silence, except for the scrape of their feet and the rustle of Hamil's mackintosh. It was curious that without the torch, which revealed the roof in front, the feeling became an obsession that the roof was lower than it actually was, and the constant fear of bumping the roof was with them all. Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle through the wall of blackness. Stooping and holding

the coat ahead soon produced backaches. But these were forgotten as another sensation became manifest. It was the feeling of apprehension that Pat and Hamil had spoken of. It grew and grew.

Mortimer cried, "I feel the roof is coming down."

"Not this roof, Professor. It's stone," Crew said.

"Back, go back!" Hamil shouted. "There's a *thing* in front of us. We must get the bag. I can't go on. Stop, Pat! I'm going back."

"Shut up, Ham!" Crew rasped. "We're all with you. There's nothing to worry about."

Pat never slowed his pace.

"Stop," Hamil shouted. "Stop. I can't stand it. We must get a light."

Crew felt a rough movement in front of him. Then a body cannoned into him and struggled to pass him. He flung his arms round the form and squeezed with all his considerable strength.

"Don't be a fool, Ham," he said quietly. "It's only a feeling. There's nothing physical. I'm as frightened as anything but I'm not letting any spook beat me."

He was surprised when Mortimer's voice gasped, "Ease up, Crewee. I can't breathe. I'm all right now. I don't know what happened. I just cracked up."

"Bad luck, Mort. I thought it was Ham. Come along, we must get on. Ham...Ham! Where are you?"

There was no reply.

"Blow me down, if they haven't carried on and left us adrift. Lay hold of my coat, Professor. I trust you not to cast off. I don't want to cast back to pick you up."

"Don't worry, Crewee. I've got hold of myself now."

"That sounds more like you, Professor. Full ahead, then."

They set off, and at once that sense of foreboding filled their minds, an instinct that something evil was approaching.

"That feeling's here again, Mort. But you hang on. Whatever it is, I shall meet it head on. All I want is to get my hands on it, and I'll take a round turn with its neck."

"Go ahead, Crewee. I shan't crack again."

Crew went along with his left hand held out in front, and his right hand touching the wall at each swing forward. So, for perhaps two minutes.

"I can hear something ahead. Now we'll settle this thing."

"Yes, a sort of swishing sound. It's coming nearer."

Mortimer had hardly spoken, when Crew's extended hand encountered a hand in mid-air. He gripped it and his right fist swung across for an uppercut, but only landed on air. The force of the blow, meeting nothing, sent his body forward into another body, and two arms encircled him. He wrenched himself round and got his right to the creature's throat. He put all his strength into a choking grip, and felt a thrill at the gasping gurgle resulting from his effort. Two hands gripped his wrist and endeavoured to drag his hand away.

"Pat, what's happened?" Hamil cried anxiously.

Crew released his grip, and the unfortunate Pat sank to the ground and sat there panting.

"Ham, what the dickens has happened?" Crew exclaimed. "How did you come here? Oh, blow me down, if the school hears of this we'll never hold up our heads again."

Crew began laughing. He laughed and laughed and laughed. He could not see them, but Hamil and Mortimer were grinning. Then they began laughing too. It was a relief from the tense emotions they had been experiencing. The passage rang with their laughter.

At last, Crew gasped out, "Pat, where are you? Don't say I've choked the voice out of you."

"Ye choked the Judo out of me. Ye caught me unprepared. But in the name of the saints, how did ye get out? Were ye returning to look for us?"

"I was going to ask you the same question. We're still in the passage to the house. We haven't come to the room with the stake in it yet. The 'terror room' I shall call it after this. What were you coming back for?"

"We're not coming back. It's you who are going the wrong way. This is the short piece out to the entrance."

"Listen, Pat. It's clear to me that somehow or other you got adrift in the little room and, instead of heading for the passage out, you went about ship into this passage again. Come along now. Let's get going."

Ham's voice chimed in. "I think what you say is correct, Crew. We were so terrified in that room, our knees were knocking. We hardly knew what we were doing. I am convinced that when we get outside, you will find that my hair is white as snow."

"Well, our names'll be black as mud if we're late for supper. Come on. I'm going to lead this time, and I've got an idea for crossing that room. Stand still everybody while I come to the front."

"Not that way, Crew. You're taking the wrong direction," Pat said, as Crew pushed past him.

"Don't you believe it, Pat. I've got the homing instinct. Now, who's this?"

"It's me, Hamil."

"Right, tail on to my raincoat. Who's behind you?"

"I think I am. Is this you I'm touching, Ham?" It was Mortimer who spoke.

"Yes, it's me, Hamil."

"And I'm pulling Mort's raincoat. Is that right, Mort?" Pat's voice spoke.

"Yes," Mortimer replied.

"Right then, full ahead," Crew said and started walking.

After only a few steps, Hamil said, "It's with me again, this terror."

"And me."... "The same here," came from the two behind him.

Crew said nothing, but suddenly he began laughing again. "Oh, blow me down. I can't help it. When I think of you two turning about and crashing into us. Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"Crew," Pat cried excitedly. "The moment you began to laugh, the terror left me. Keep it up, boy, keep it up."

"So it did me," Mortimer said.

"And me," Hamil agreed.

"Mine's gone too," Crew stated. "We've found something, chaps. Keep on laughing. The thing can't stand good human laughs."

The passage resounded to their laughter and Crew increased the pace. After a minute he said,

"Here's the room. Ha, ha, ha! I'm laughing at you, spook. Now, everybody, hang on to your coats, make a chain across the room, and, Pat, you stay in the mouth of that passage till I've found the other one."

Crew stood for a moment with a hand on either wall of the passage, visualising the relative positions of the two entrances. He decided that if he went straight forward, he would reach a wall, and if he then edged to the left, he should find the entrance to the other passage. He went forward and, once out of reach of any guiding wall, he realised how easy it must have been for Pat, his mind mazed by the terror of the place, to lose all sense of direction. At the fourth step his outstretched hand encountered a wall. He edged along to the left and found the other entrance at once.

"I've got it," he called. "Come along. Are you all with me, Mort, Ham, Pat?"

Three voices assured him that they were. In a few minutes a dim light was visible in front of them.

"There's the blessed light. We've made it!"

Five minutes later they were standing on the edge of the cavity. Crew looked at his watch.

"Ten minutes past five. I can't believe it. I thought it must be getting on for six. We'll jog-trot when we get to the road. We shall make it easily. Well, chaps, it's been some experience."

They stood for a moment looking at each other and grinning rather sheepishly.

Hamil said, "What colour is my hair?"

He removed his cap. Pat was beside him and looked closely. "It's no colour for which there's a name. You might call it nondescript. But it's not white. You're tougher than you thought, Ham."

Crew laughed. "Come on, you two juniors. You'll never grow up."

They made their way through the undergrowth to the road. As they broke through the hedge, a figure striding along the road said,

"Hullo. Where have you been? Bird-nesting?"

It was Marshall, the new master.

"Hullo, sir," Crew greeted him. "Not bird-nesting, mole chasing, underground. You'll have to excuse us, sir. We're a bit late. We shall have to jog-trot, or we may not make it."

"I'm not letting you go till you've explained the cryptic occupation. I'll stand for your being late. Don't worry. I'll say you were with me. Now, let's hear about it. What is mole chasing?"

The four found Marshall's genial personality very attractive. Crew and Mortimer walked on one side of him, and Hamil and Pat the other.

Crew started from the beginning, describing how Pat and Hamil had discovered the passage. Each of the four chipped in at intervals, continuing the story. Beyond exclamations of appreciation or surprise, Marshall made no comment. He chuckled loudly at the head-on collision between Crew and Pat. When the

story finally came to an end, he spoke at some length.

"You've had a unique adventure, you know, and I think, repeat think, you have stumbled on a plot to kidnap young Denver."

Exclamations from both sides.

"First of all, your Jo'burg is the way most South Africans refer to Johannesburg. I don't know Sir Harry Denver's life story in detail, but it's pretty picturesque and I should not be a bit surprised if he had married your tall man's girl friend, and also made a packet out of the other fellow's invention. When you consider that remark about 'when he gets the lad back, he'll leave no stone unturned to get you,' can't you picture it as applying to Sir Harry Denver? And your tall chap, by the way, is called Greatorex, at least that is the name he is known by down here. Why should he come to an out-of-the-way spot like this? I have gathered from Commer, who had dinner at the Grange, that he doesn't hunt or fish or shoot. The only reason that explains his coming here is to kidnap young Denver. Mind you, I may be entirely wrong, but I think you'll admit that the kidnap theory fits in with every word you heard."

"Absolutely," Crew agreed. "But what part of the story gave you the clue, sir? We should never have thought of that in a month of Sundays."

"Brilliant, wasn't it?" Marshall chuckled. "But if you had been in the common room last night, and heard the argument about the school's responsibility in accepting a millionaire's son, just after all the fuss about Morton, the American millionaire's son who was

kidnapped from his school, you would probably have got the same idea yourself."

"There can be no question about it," Pat said. "The only question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"First of all," Marshall replied, "absolute secrecy. Does anyone else know about your discovery?"

Crew explained how they had nearly told Mr. Commer about the original discovery, and had suggested that they might have something to tell him when they returned from this present investigation.

Marshall said, "I suggest you say nothing about it to Mr. Commer. With all due respect to him, he is not a man of action, whereas I am. And this thing is going to require very delicate handling at the beginning, and, I think, some smart action at the end. A schoolmaster's job is very like a civil servant's, restricted by red tape and tradition. But Naval history has been made by men who cut through red tape and hit the enemy in his weakest spot and laid him out, while the red tape merchants were still talking."

Crew replied, "It sounds very exciting, sir. I haven't the foggiest notion what course you are on, but I'm all for cutting red tape."

"That's the spirit. Now, here is the position as I see it. Until the boy is kidnapped, we can do nothing. If we report what you have heard to Dr. Mansfield, he can notify Sir Harry Denver, who will do one of three things—laugh at the idea, remove the boy from the school, or instruct the Head to hire a guard for the boy. None of those things will redound to the credit of the school, and the man Greatorix will still be at large and

free to carry out his purpose, and he sounds to me like a very determined sort of chap. To my mind, the solution of the project is to catch the man in the act and get him put away for a number of years. In almost every country, kidnapping carries a very severe penalty. I believe in the States the penalty is death. We are in the fortunate position of being forewarned, and if we take the right action at the right time, the boy should come to no harm. His father, being a man of action himself, will praise the school to the skies, and praise from a man like that should bring a lot more boys. So, as I see it, for the moment we must sit tight and say nothing. If our supposition is wrong and there is no plot to kidnap the boy, no harm will be done. If the boy is kidnapped, we ought to be in a position to rescue him and get Greatorrex imprisoned, which will remove any future threat to young Denver. Any comments?"

"No comments from me, sir. Only commendation," Crew replied.

Hamil said, "Do you not think we ought to warn young Denver?"

"That is something we must consider. I haven't seen the boy yet. If he is the right type, we might warn him."

Pat suggested, "Do you think one of us ought to shadow him, if he goes to Werley, or on Sunday when he takes his walk?"

"I think that would only complicate matters. We can be quite certain that he will be taken to the Grange, and through your discovery of the secret passages, we should be able to trace him, and find out where he is confined."

Mortimer's comment was, "It looks as though D-Day will be Saturday or Sunday, because Greatorrex attached importance to the other man's arrival at Johannesburg on that day."

"Yes. That is my idea also. The chap in Jo'burg will have the job of contacting Sir Harry Denver and giving him the terms for the return of the boy."

"But it looks as though he does not intend to return him," Pat contended.

"Yes. We know that, but Sir Harry won't be told that, obviously. If Greatorrex intends to make the father suffer, he will keep the non-return of the boy up his sleeve until his conditions have been complied with. Then it will be a double blow, when the father has complied with the terms, and still fails to recover his son."

"I suppose Greatorrex knows what Denver looks like," Crew said, "otherwise he's going to have a job picking him out from our four hundred."

Marshall grinned. "He has already seen him. That man doesn't let the grass grow under his feet. He got Mr. Commer to show him round last Friday. Said he was considering sending his son to Ramsden. Mr. Commer was so proud of having Denver at Beetham, that he pointed the boy out, so Greatorrex knows what he looks like."

"I think that's proof that Greatorrex only came to Beetham to see Denver," Crew stated.

"It certainly looks like it, and I should say that if Denver goes to Werley tomorrow, Thursday, he will be reported missing, and then we shall have to take action."

"It doesn't give us much time, sir. We shall have to shake a leg. Have you any idea for a plan?"

"Not yet. I've got to think about it. I tell you what. I'll come along after prep. tonight, and we'll get down to it. See if we can't fix a plan that'll sink him."

And that was the position when the four went into supper that night. They were unusually silent during the meal, each busy with his own thoughts.

It was going to be no light matter to save Denver from the clutches of so ruthless a man as Greatorex appeared to be. It did not seem right to expose the boy to any danger, yet if they were to tell anyone of their suspicions at the moment, they would probably not be believed, as they had no proof that Greatorex did actually intend to kidnap Denver. If he was to be brought to justice he must be caught red-handed, with the boy in his possession, and this might mean causing Denver some hours of acute distress, if not actual physical suffering. There seemed to be no answer to the problem, and they were all secretly glad to have the support of Marshall, who was sport enough not to interfere with their project, but could be relied on to advise them against taking any unnecessary risks.



CHAPTER FOUR

Council of War

VERY little prep. was done in the Corner that night. None of them could get that afternoon's adventures out of their minds, and even when they did, thoughts of the coming conference with Marshall and further adventures that might arise from it stopped them from concentrating on work. When the eight o'clock bell went, they gave up the unequal struggle and shelved their books.

Crew said, "Commer is bound to turn up and we have to decide what yarn we're going to spin."

"You're right, Crew, and we must be rid of him before Marshall turns up," Pat added. "We'll tell him it was a false alarm and we found nothing."

"Pat, you are the outside limit. Will you never learn the difference between truth and fiction?"

"I always tell the truth, Crewee, except on those rare occasions when necessity requires a slight variation from actual facts."

"Those rare occasions are all too common in your life, Pat. But I won't have them in mine. We shall have to tell him something, and I think it's best to say that we found an underground passage, which we think leads to the Grange, and leave it at that."

Mortimer said, "It must be kept secret, or every junior in the school will be looking for the place."

"But do not tell him where it is, then no harm will be done," Hamil put in.

Hamil had hardly spoken, when a knock on the door preceded Commer's entrance.

"Good evening, Corner House. What news of the great exploration?"

"Not very much news, sir. As a matter of fact, last Sunday, Pat and Hamil found what they thought was a secret passage, and today we explored it, but, at a critical moment, both our torches went out, so we haven't anything to report, except that we may try again next Sunday."

Hamil said, "We would have been better employed working out figure formations for Mr. Marshall. We are becoming very interested in his theories about figures. Actually, we are expecting him here tonight to have a discussion."

"But what caused you to think you had found a secret passage? Not in the school surely?"

"Oh no, sir. In the woods near Werley. A cavity in the ground and a hole leading from it, but it may have been one of those places where they stored a lot of shells and things after the war."

Well, well, I find that a trifle disappointing. I was expecting some thrilling piece of news."

A knock on the door, and the entry of Mr. Marshall interrupted Mr. Commer's remark. "You are fortunate in your pupils, Marshall," he said. "They are eagerly awaiting some figure drill from you."

The friendly grin with which Marshall had entered remained unchanged. He said, "They're a bright lot, these four, and I'll make mathematicians out of them before I've finished."

"Then heaven forbid that I should damp such enthusiasm. I'll leave you to it. Good night, Corner House."

Commer went out and closed the door. In a loud voice, Marshall said, "Now, get round the table and we'll get down to it."

They drew up chairs and placed one for Marshall. When they were seated, Crew said, "A decoration for you, Ham. You saved the situation."

Hamil modestly replied, "I had the idea that Mr. Marshall might arrive before Mr. Commer had left, so I thought I would prepare the way."

Crew explained to Marshall what had happened, and repeated exactly what he had told the junior housemaster.

Pat said, "When I heard what you said, Crewee, I thought it was the finest example of telling the truth

and meaning a lie, that I ever heard. Don't ever tell me again that I find difficulty in differentiating truth from fiction."

They all laughed.

Crew said, "Now, sir. You are in the chair. For the last hour, our eyes have been looking at prep. but our minds have been forming plans. We should like to hear yours first, though."

"I've been doing the same thing, my eyes on junior prep., but my mind on friend Greatorex. I put myself in his position and tried to work out what I should do if I were him. And I decided that I should take no part in the kidnapping. I learned from Commer that he has three men with him, a cook, a valet, and a chauffeur. I think they will carry out the job. But first the boy must be pointed out to them, and the first opportunity will be tomorrow, when half the school will go to Werley. So, if it were me, I should find some excuse for sitting in that upstairs room facing the street, in the Blue Anchor. Commer tells me that they serve teas there in the summer, so obviously it is not a living-room."

Mortimer said, "That bay window would make an ideal observation post. We always try for that window in the summer, when we have tea there. You can see the road both ways."

"Good enough. I should have one or two of the men with me, and a pair of good binoculars, so that when the lad comes in sight, his face and his walk can be carefully studied."

Hamil said, "I have always noticed in these abduc-

tion cases, that the criminals are recognised by some unexpected person, and that is what leads to their capture. If I were planning this abduction, I should want to take Denver where no one could see me, and tomorrow that would be impossible, as there are chaps within sight wherever you go on a Thursday."

"You've got something there, Ham. It looks as though tomorrow will only be an identification parade. Sunday's walk would be the only time you could catch him. But even then there will be a pair of them or more," Crew stated.

Marshall agreed. "It is obvious that whoever carries out the 'snatch'—we may as well use the correct term, that is what criminals call it—will have to be disguised. I wonder if Greatorex will think of that."

Mortimer said, "It does not really matter what Greatorex thinks about that, sir. Our object is not to catch him in the act, so how he carries it out does not matter. Our aim, as I see it, is to arrange for the police to arrest him when the boy is actually in his possession."

Pat grinned at Marshall. "There y'have the scientific mind applied to the problem, sir. The Professor has made the whole position clear."

"How right you are," Marshall agreed. "Obviously we were straying a long way from the path."

"But we were not wasting our time," Hamil remarked. "For it is clear now that the abduction will not take place tomorrow, but on Sunday, and that will give us more time to plan and arrange."

"You're right, Hamil, and the best way to discover

what action we must take is to imagine that Denver has been kidnapped. Now, when would his absence first be noticed?"

Crew replied, "It could be two ways. Roll call at five or, of course, whoever was out with him might come rushing back shouting that Denver had been kidnapped."

"In that case, obviously, the headmaster would have to notify the police, and the boy's father, but I think it will be more subtle than that, and his absence will not be known till roll call. Naturally there will be enquiries and finally a search party will go out, and I think it will not be till they return without him that the police will be notified."

"And when do we come in, sir?" Pat demanded.

"We shall take up action stations earlier in the afternoon. I shall get permission for you four to come with me on a special expedition, with leave to return at any time up to, say, nine p.m. We will go by your passage and thoroughly explore the secret passages in the Grange, taking it in turn to keep watch through your spy-hole."

"Yipee!" Pat exclaimed. "I'm going to enjoy myself."

Crew said, "Will the Hibernian brother kindly control himself?"

Marshall was grinning. It was like being in a ward-room again. He continued, "With any luck, we ought to get a line on where young Denver is being concealed. Then comes a ticklish job. We have to get word to the police, who will be loath to search the Grange. In any

case, they will have to get a search warrant from a magistrate——”

Pat broke in, “Supposing when the police come, he says, ‘Yes, the boy is here. I found him wandering round in a distressed condition, and I was about to bring him back to the school.’ ”

Mortimer said, “That was the picture in my mind, when I said that Greatorex must be found with the boy undeniably in his possession. It appears to me that he must be allowed to remain at the Grange for at least twenty-four hours, though forty-eight would be better. That is the only condition which will prove Greatorex undeniably guilty.”

“You’ve made a point there, Mortimer,” Marshall admitted. “That washes out any idea of notifying the police on Sunday night. It also raises the question of keeping a watch on the Grange. Now we’re up against a brick wall. Do you happen to know the local policeman?”

“Sure we know him,” Pat said. “His name is James Weir, and he lives in a little house beyond Werley. We passed it coming home with you today, sir. Front garden full of flowers, hedges neat, and the place looks very smart.”

“I remember. I noticed it had a telephone.”

“Yes, that’s the place, and James is a very smart man.”

“Good. We may have to take him into our confidence. Because, although we may have seen the boy in the Grange, we do not know how long he will be kept there.”

"That's right," Crew confirmed. "Greatorrex said, 'Did I say he would get him back?' But what would he do with him? He surely wouldn't kill him. I've got a feeling we're fringing on deep water, sir."

"I think you're right, Crew. Which brings us back to the point whether we have the right to withhold from the police the information that Denver is in the Grange, once we have confirmed that he is. What is the feeling of the meeting about this?"

Pat, Mortimer and Hamil considered there could be no justification for doing anything which might risk injury to Denver. Mortimer said, "If you consider there is any risk of his being killed, sir, we should notify the police of all we have discovered so far."

"From what the man was heard to say, there does seem to be this risk," Marshall stated. "But if we notify the police, and nothing happens, we should look very foolish, and, frankly, I am not prepared to do this, because I cannot see that there will be any risk to Denver, at least in the first twelve hours. So we are back to where we started, how we are going to notify the police on Sunday. I think the only way possible is for two to return through the passage and telephone from James Weir's house, while the rest of us keep watch. When the police arrive, we can come out through the secret room into the library."

Hamil said, "You speak of police in the plural, sir. But in Werley we have never known them as anything but singular. Do you expect policemen from Salisbury?"

"Undoubtedly. I imagine that James Weir will come

to the school when he is informed that Denver is missing. But he'll probably ring the station ticket office first and find out if any Ramsden boy has gone anywhere by train. Then he will come to the school and ask some questions. If there is any suspicion of foul play, he will ring up headquarters at Salsbury at once, otherwise he'll wait till he is convinced that Denver has really disappeared, and is not at some cottage with a sprained ankle or something similar."

Crew said, "The evidence of the boy or boys who'd been with him should clear up that."

"Of course. So it's quite likely that Weir will ring Salsbury pretty soon. I should think the least Salsbury would send would be a patrol car with a sergeant or inspector and two or three men."

"And," Pat put in, "our information will likely be with James Weir by that time, so there should be a squad of police at the door, and I'm thinking it'll need a squad, for there are four of them at the Grange, and if the other three are anything like as tough as the great XYZ looks to be, it's not going to be child's play arresting them."

"Lightning and thunder supplied by the manufacturer, Patrick O'Rory," Hamil murmured.

"I think Pat's justified this time," Crew stated.

"I'm sure he is," Marshall agreed. "The trouble with modern life is that it's so secure. We are so used to sitting between the safety of our four walls and only reading of murder, arson and theft, as something that could never happen to us, that we lose sight of the hatred behind most of these crimes. Think of what

XYZ—I shall always think of him as XYZ in future, Pat—think of what he said, ‘I’ve waited fifteen years for this moment.’ Think of all the hatred built up in those years. It must have become a mountain of hate to drive a man like XYZ to go to the lengths he has, in order to make his enemy suffer.”

“What kind of a man do you think he is, then?” Hamil enquired.

“From what you have told me, he appears to be a man of some authority. Mr. Commer reported him as a wealthy man with a tremendous personality. I should say he is a man of some consequence, but whether in the business world or the world beyond the law, it’s not possible to say. Frankly, I think he is a dangerous man, and if I thought there was the slightest chance of any of you coming into direct contact with him, I’d forbid you to go anywhere near the Grange. But I think just watching is a fairly safe proposition, and I should not be a bit surprised if it saved Denver’s life.”

Marshall looked at his watch. “Time marches on. We must close this session. But I think we have all got a pretty clear impression of the picture and the possibilities. We have decided to man the Grange as an invisible reception committee next Sunday; we know the drill for informing the police—and by the way you’d better all get by heart James Weir’s telephone number, the school number and the Grange number—and we have agreed that the police must be told as soon as we know where Denver is. So we’ll fix the Sunday rendezvous, at five minutes past two at the main gates.”

Pat said, "I'm thinking we should take some sandwiches and a couple of thermos flasks along next Sunday, sir."

"I'm with you there, Pat. We'll make you caterer to the Grange Secret Investigation Society, all expenses to be shared. But, one last warning. Let me impress on you the necessity for absolute secrecy, which includes everything we have said. Good night."

He went out, quietly closing the door behind him.

For a moment there was silence, then Crew spoke.

"I don't know how it strikes you chaps, but I forecast squalls and dirty weather ahead."

Hamil's slow voice came in. "I may not be gifted with second sight, but the immediate future appears to me to hold unlimited amounts of unsafety."

"Nonsense," Pat stated. "This time next week we'll all have been awarded the Ramsden halo, and a fat sum to divide between us from a grateful millionaire father."

Mortimer said, "Marshall is clever. This business has all the appearance of being exciting, and he would not miss it for anything. But he would be in trouble if it was known that he had knowingly taken Ramsden boys into danger. So he tells us that if he thought there was any danger, he would not allow us to go. In that way, if anything does happen to us, he will not be held to blame."

"You may be right, Mort, but he's sport enough to come in with us, and it's the first time we've ever had a master on one of our stunts. I've got a feeling he's going to be very useful if things go wrong."

Pat said, "I wonder if the spook'll put the fear into him when he first goes in?"

"Well, we didn't feel it the first time," Crew stated. "It was only coming back that it got us."

"I think the reason we didn't feel it the first time," said Hamil, "was because we were all *expecting* to meet it, and had braced ourselves to face it. Besides, we had plenty of light. On the way back we had no torches, so that it was a bit spooky anyway and, once we began to panic, we just let the terror run away with us. Remember, it stopped as soon as we started to laugh."

Mortimer said, "That is extraordinarily interesting. I shall certainly report it to the S.P.R."

The four discussed the phenomena of the 'fear' until bedtime.

On Thursday morning the chief thought in their minds was the visit to Werley when afternoon school finished. It would be exciting to see the occupants of the bay window in the Blue Anchor conducting their identification parade. Also, Mortimer and Hamil were anxious to see the villain, Greatorrex himself.

Actually, at the time when four pairs of eyes, from various vantage points, were concentrating on the bay window of the Blue Anchor, Greatorrex was in the library at the Grange. He had been looking for a book that might throw light on the history of the strange house. In the corner opposite the two walls with windows, he replaced a heavy volume and pushed it home, perhaps with a little more vigour than was necessary, and, to his astonishment, the four lower shelves gave, and receded an inch. He pushed again

and the whole mass swung gently inwards, revealing a dark cavity.

"I thought as much from these walls," he murmured.

He went to the fireplace and pressed an electric bell button, then returned to the gap in the library shelves. The short, broad man with a round head and a slit of a mouth, who had admitted Commer on the occasion of his dinner at the Grange, entered the library and crossed to where Greatorex was standing.

"Get a torch, Griff. I think I have found a priest's hole."

"I'm not surprised," the man Griff replied as he went for a torch. "A place like this was bound to have a place like that."

When Griff returned with the torch, Greatorex took it and, bending low, entered the tiny panelled room. The first thing the torch revealed was Pat's bag on the long seat.

"The last occupant departed in a hurry; left his luggage behind," Greatorex remarked.

The "luggage" was a small brown canvas hold-all with zip-fastener and two handles. Greatorex picked it up, and returned to the library.

"Nothing historical about this," he murmured as he placed it on a table and pulled back the zip. He examined the articles in the bag—hammer, chisels, pliers, pincers, a small steel wedge, nails and screws, string, torch batteries, a few fathoms of neatly coiled, fine line, some sheets of paper, envelopes and a pencil.

"Extraordinary collection. With a jemmy, some putty, and a few sticks of gelignite, it could be a

burglar's outfit. I wonder when he found that room, and why he hasn't returned for his bag. None of these tools are rusty. They cannot have been there long, and the writing paper and envelopes are crisp."

"He couldn't have got in while we've been here. One of us would have spotted him," Griff stated.

"Nevertheless I think he has. Two days ago I had books out of those shelves, and they were firm as rocks."

An idea struck him, and Greatorex picked up the bag and laid the canvas against his cheek. He held the bag out to Griff. "Would you say that canvas was quite dry?"

Griff took the bag and felt it all over. "See what you mean. It was raining' yes'day. Could be...Jest a minute." He switched on an electric heater in the panelling and held the canvas to the glow. After a few moments a faint mist rose from the canvas. Griff switched off the heater. "That was wet yes'day all right."

Greatorex nodded his head. "Yes, but why, and how is it no one saw him, and why did he leave in a hurry? I think it must be coincidence. Nobody knows anything of us or our plans."

"Jest a minute. What did he want all them tools for? He thought he was going to break in somewhere. If he knew the way in from here, he wouldn't need any tools, and if he didn't know the way in from here, the tools wouldn't help him, 'cos we'd 've spotted him before he'd been able to do any funny business with the walls. Which means, he didn't come in through this room. There must be another way in."

"That is the conclusion I have arrived at. We must find it."

Greatorrex began by examining the door. He soon discovered the disc which lifted the tongue of the lock, and a similar disc on the panelling behind the library shelf.

"If there is another entrance, one of these discs should be the handle to it. Hold the torch, Griff."

Griff directed the light on to disc after disc, as Greatorrex endeavoured to turn each one with the tips of his long sinewy fingers. At last one moved.

"This is it," Greatorrex said, as he turned the disc a complete half-circle, and pushed. The panelled door swung open, revealing complete blackness beyond.

"Pretty cute," Griff said. "Can't think what they went to all that trouble for."

"There were no planes or cars in those days, Griff. You had to be able to hide on the spot if you wanted to make a get-away, and you often found that the man who had arrived to arrest you had surrounded the house before he knocked at the door, so it was useful to be able to get out unobserved. There should be a way out by underground tunnel, if we can find it. Probably one of the schoolboys found his way in by accident and got as far as the priest's hole."

"Not the first time, he didn't. When he took them tools, he knew what he was going after. That must have been the second time. Probably had a pal with him that time."

"Yes, that is quite likely. I expect they will return for that bag, and we must catch them and put them

through a drill that will negate any idea of a subsequent visit."

"What about tonight?"

"No need to let that concern you. They will only come on their days off, Saturday or Sunday. They came yesterday, I imagine, because it was wet and there were no games."

"How are you going to catch 'em?"

"Baker can run an electric alarm from the bag. We will replace it where we found it. It should not be difficult to catch them when we hear the alarm."

Griff departed to call Baker, the chauffeur.

While he was away, Greatorrex checked the opening apparatus on both sides of the door into the priest's hole. Once he was satisfied that he could open the door, he stepped into the passage and flashed the torch round. He saw the ramp and appreciated at once its object. He made a mental note that when he caught the boy or boys returning for the bag, he would instil such fear into their hearts that there would be no desire for a repeat visit.

Leaving the ramp behind, he continued along the passage. After a few yards it ran into another passage, crossing the end at right angles. He flashed his torch to left and right. The light showed a flight of steps to the left. Greatorrex realised that he was at ground level and that these steps were to surmount doorways. He saw a flash of torch behind, and called out that he was going up the left-hand steps. At the top of the steps, he reckoned he must be over the entrance to the great dining-hall. He flashed his torch over the wall to look

for anything resembling a spy-hole, and saw a narrow strip of smooth stone which could be slid to one side. A gleam at the bottom of the steps showed where Griff and Baker were ascending. It flashed through his mind that if they murdered him and left him here, it was extremely improbable that he would be found before his bones had decomposed. Then he recollected the schoolboys. Of course, they would find him, and that was a comforting thought.

Beside him, Baker's soft voice came out of the darkness.

"This is a queer set-up, boss. What's the idea of getting behind the scenes like this?"

"What would you do, Baker, if you found a priest's hole and secret passages in your house. Wouldn't you want to explore and see how far they extended?"

"No, siree, I would not. I'd have them filled in and closed up."

"It would not interest you to know how suspicious of each other people were in historical times? How they found it necessary to spy on each other, like this?"

Greatorex slid the stone strip to one side, and the three of them were looking down into the great dining-hall. It was not empty, and the sound of voices was clear and distinct. The cook and a little plump man in a raincoat were standing looking up at a moderate-sized portrait of a young man, head and shoulders only, wearing a silk doublet and having a pointed golden beard. Even to those ignorant of art, it was possible to realise what a masterpiece the picture was.

"You said a 'undred jest now. You can't go back on that," came up to the listeners, in the cook's voice.

"A hundred," Greatorex murmured. "If anyone got that picture for a thousand, he would be very lucky."

"I guess Cookie'll be lucky if he gets a hundred for it, now you've seen the carry on," Baker replied.

"Do you fellows never keep your word?" Greatorex asked in a tense whisper. "The three of you gave me your word that you would drop all graft while you were working for me."

"And we did. We kept strictly to ourselves," Baker replied.

"What do you call this, then? Selling the art treasures of the house behind my back."

"We didn't go out for that, boss. That little guy there just dropped in one day when you was in London, and offered us a fifty spot each if we'd let him take an old picture off the wall in the passage. Well, you couldn't expect us to turn down anything as easy as that. Why, you never even noticed it had gone. I'm not too sure myself where it was."

"You will remember where it was, when you find that the hundred pounds a month each that I am paying you is not sufficient to cover the value of what has been stolen."

Baker continued, still in his soft voice, "That wouldn't worry us, boss, nor you neither, 'cos we'd all be doing time together. You see, if you didn't keep your bargain of a hundred a month and all found, we shouldn't have to keep our side of the agreement about not squealing. I shouldn't worry about the pictures. I bet they're covered by insurance."

The sinister threat in the soft voice was not in any

way disguised. Greatorex knew that when he was up against an immovable object the only thing to do was to pull back, and look for a way round. And he would find that way round in his own good time. In the meantime...

"Well, now that I have seen what is happening, it has got to stop. Unless you give me your word, here and now, and I know that you speak for the three of you, that no more art treasures go out of this house while we are in occupation, we will pack up and drop the whole thing, and that will be the end of your easy money holiday in the old country."

Baker in his turn knew when it was wise to be discreet. He knew this big man was quite capable of doing what he had threatened. You could buck him only so far.

"O.K., boss. We'll call it a go. No more art treasures out of the house while we are here. Though it sure goes against the grain to see all that money hanging on them walls, without a lock or chain, and we got to walk by as though 'twasn't there."

"Well, that is the only condition on which I stay," Greatorex stated definitely.

He moved on after sliding the panel back into place, and it was noticeable that, once the panel was in position, not a sound could be heard from the room below, although the cook had still been arguing as the panel closed.

They continued along passage after passage and noted that in every room on the ground floor there was a spy-hole. It was soon apparent that all the inside walls

of the old house contained secret passages. At one place, a narrow stairway led up to more interior passages in the second storey. The point that puzzled Grestorex more and more was the absence of entries into any rooms except the priest's hole in the library. He felt also that there must be an opening somewhere that would connect with a subterranean tunnel or passage leading to the world outside. But, despite the most careful scrutiny and search, the three men were unable to discover this exit.

When they finally came out, they were so covered in cobwebs and dust that baths and a complete change were necessary before a meal could be taken. After the meal, considerable preparations were necessary for an operation that was to take place in the small hours of the morning.





CHAPTER FIVE

Operation Abduction

As head boy of Beetham, Crew could have had his own room to sleep in, but he preferred sharing a large bedroom with the other three from the Corner. The previous evening had been a great disappointment, when neither the principal villain nor any of his servants had shown themselves at the Blue Anchor. The question naturally arose that if they had been wrong in their guess about the identity parade, they might be equally wrong in their expectation of the kidnapping on Sunday, or, for that matter, of any kidnapping at all. After considerable discussion, the four had retired to bed feeling like punctured balloons. Or perhaps it would be correct to say, three of them, for O'Rory the

optimist, before he put the light out, being as usual last in bed, was still maintaining that the parade must have taken place, but not from the Blue Anchor.

Next morning, Friday, the school bell clanged its urgent 7 a.m. summons for the four hundred boys to rise from their beds, hitch up their belts, and assume another day's duties. In Beetham's Dormitory B half a dozen figures got out of bed and shot along to the line of basins in the bathroom at the end of the dormitory, before the bell had been ringing ten seconds. The bell gave three ten-second peals, with a ten-second gap between each peal. Any boy still in bed at the end of the third peal received fifteen minutes' punishment drill after lunch, at the discretion of the dormitory prefect. Tyson was the prefect in this case. He had his own little cubicle at the end of the dormitory next to the bathroom. It was his practice to emerge immediately the school bell finished its third peal, glance along the line of beds to ensure that none was occupied, and saunter to his own basin at the end of the row in the bathroom.

It was a rule for a boy to turn his bedclothes back over the end of the bed when he got up. As a result, any blanket-covered form still in bed would be conspicuous in the line of bare sheets and pillows. The fourth bed from the window was conspicuous on this Friday morning. The blankets appeared to be covering a sleeping form. Tyson went over to the bed and pulled back the blankets and sheet.

"Come along, Denver. Time to get up." He was always easy on new boys, but in this case the form

under the blankets was a pillow down the middle of the bed. He looked round at a number of grinning faces.

"Somebody trying to pull Tyson's leg, eh? Fetch Denver, one of you."

Three youths sped to the bathroom crying "Denver, Tyson wants you, quickly."

The bathroom echoed to their cries, but there was no responding cry of "Coming." Odd corners were investigated, but Denver was not to be found. Tyson's easy manner hardened a little.

"Did any of you see him this morning?" he enquired. There were only negative replies.

"Very well, which of you can remember seeing him last night?" This was easier, but the answers merely confirmed that Denver had definitely undressed and gone to bed the previous night.

"His clothes and shoes have gone, Tyson," one boy announced. The prefect's mouth became grim when he confirmed this fact. Obviously the next step was to inform Mr. Commer and Mr. Moore, and he wasted no time. He slipped into his dressing-gown and hurried along to Mr. Commer's room.

"Hullo, Tyson. What's the trouble?"

"I don't know if it's trouble yet, sir, but Denver is not to be found, and his clothes are gone also. He'd put his pillow down the middle of the bed to give the impression that it was occupied, so it looks as though he wanted to keep his absence secret as long as possible. Shall I tell Mr. Moore?"

"Er——" Mr. Commer hesitated. "No, you go back

and get dressed. I'll come along to the dormitory, then I'll tell Mr. Moore."

"It wouldn't take a second for me to pop along to Mr. Moore, sir. I feel time is important. We may just catch him at the railway station if we phone now."

"I think you may leave this to me, Tyson. You have informed me promptly. You may now leave the matter in my hands."

Tyson was dressed by the time that Mr. Commer entered Dormitory B, so were the boys. Twenty expectant faces were turned towards Mr. Commer.

"Now, which is Denver's bed?"

"This one, sir."

Commer looked at the bed but failed, apparently, to read any clues in the slightly rumpled sheet and pillow.

"Who first discovered the boy's absence?"

Tyson explained that he was responsible for the discovery.

"What steps did you take to confirm his absence?"

"We looked everywhere, then we found that his clothes and shoes were missing, which seemed the final confirmation."

"Yes, there can be no question about his absence from the dormitory. Send two boys to look round the schoolroom, the changing-rooms and the downstairs lavatories, and report back here. The rest of you stay here till Mr. Moore comes up. I am going down to see him now."

Mr. Moore was a heavy man, comfortable and round. He had a short, ginger moustache, many freckles,

shrewd, brown eyes and vivid red hair. Within a few minutes of Mr. Commer's departure, he pushed open the swing-door of the dormitory, took in the scene in one curt, amused glance and moved over to Denver's bed, beside which Tyson was still standing.

"This the bed, eh?" He picked up the pillow and smelt both sides. Then he drew the clothes from the bottom up to the pillow and again smelt the sheet and blankets.

To Commer and Tyson he indicated the bed and said,

"See if you can smell anything. Let the boys smell. They've got a keener sense than we have."

He walked over to the window and called, Tyson. "Could you smell anything?" he asked when the prefect came over.

"Yes, a kind of chemical smell, sir. Could it have been chloroform?"

"I think so. Now, this window. Is the lower window usually open as much as this?"

"No, sir. Never more than three or four inches. I don't know who opened it as wide as this."

"The men who carried Denver down. No marks on the window as far as I can see. We'll go down and look at the grass for ladder marks."

"You mean he has been kidnapped, sir?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it? Come along." As he passed the crowd round the bed with Mr. Commer, he enquired, "Any of you smell chloroform?"

Immediately affirmatives came from a number of treble voices. Mr. Commer fell in beside Mr. Moore.

"This is an unbelievable occurrence. You don't really think he has been kidnapped, do you?"

"If he hasn't, where is he? It's the very thing we were discussing last night. We were congratulating ourselves that America was the habitat of the kidnap bird, but it seems that he has flown the Atlantic."

Headed by Mr. Moore, Mr. Commer and Tyson, the dormitory party descended the stairs, passed out through the front door, joined by odd boys who scented an unusual occurrence, and, collecting quite a party from the schoolroom, made their way round to the grass lawn below Dormitory B's window. Before they arrived there, Tyson said,

"We've got most of the house here, sir. They'll obliterate any tracks."

"Of course. Send them all back, Commer, will you?"

The excitement faded from four or five dozen young faces as reluctant feet returned to the playground, from whence they gazed at the three figures under Dormitory B's window.

"We'd better approach from the side," Moore said.

They made a detour and from one side the marks of a ladder were clearly visible on the grass.

"That is the final confirmation I wanted," Mr. Moore announced. "Now we will inform the headmaster and the police."

At 7.40, the school bell clanged and the houses formed up and marched along to the great dining-hall for breakfast. In less than five minutes, after grace had been said, the news of Denver's abduction was common property. Crew, Tyson, another prefect and the three

from "The Corner" sat at the head of one of the tables, so the four soon learned all that was known of the abduction.

"Naturally, when I found his clothes had gone, I thought he'd run away. Couldn't imagine why. He seemed a bright, cheerful little chap, perfectly happy. But I thought, a millionaire's son, probably a bit cranky, a law unto himself. So I beetled down to Commer, thinking we'd probably catch him at the station if we hurried. But you know what a dear old spinster Commer is. He wouldn't hurry and he positively forbade me go on to Moore. So I came up and dressed. I wish you could have seen Commer when he came up to the Dorm. Simply hadn't an idea. Wouldn't believe Denver was out of the house. I shouldn't have been a bit surprised if he'd got on his hands and knees and looked under the bed. Finally, he brought Moore up. That was a different kettle of fish altogether. In under five minutes, Moore had discovered chloroform on the pillow and sheets, the window wide open and ladder marks on the lawn outside. Now he's gone to tell the Old Man and report to the police. I expect we shall all be cross-examined in the course of the morning."

Events turned out very much as Tyson had forecast. Constable James Weir from Werley very soon had the Salisbury police out. Inspector Witing arrived in a police car with a sergeant and two constables. Tyson was fetched for questioning, and Mr. Moore and Mr. Commer were also in the dormitory when Witing carried out his preliminary investigation. After obtaining all the information they could give, which a constable

took down in shorthand, Witing allowed Tyson and Mr. Commer to go.

He said to Mr. Moore, "There's no question about his being kidnapped. If he had run away, he would have left his pyjamas behind. Everything points to careful planning. To my mind, the fact that they took his clothes away indicates that they are going to look after him, or they're going to take him on a journey where he may be seen. The people who arranged this knew the dormitory, and they had no doubt which bed the boy occupied. They didn't have to identify him first. They knew the window would be open, and they came quietly in, held a pad under the boy's nose, and if he showed any signs of waking, jammed it over his nose and mouth, and held him down till he went limp. I think that is what must have happened, or there would not be so much chloroform on the pillow and sheet. And——"

Moore interrupted, and his face was very grim. "Shooting would be too merciful a death for anyone who could treat a boy like that." He paused for a moment, regaining his composure, and said, "Sorry, Inspector. Your words made the picture so vivid, I realised what that boy's feelings must have been. Pray continue."

"I was going to say that there must have been two of them to hold him quite still so that there was no noise. But the first thing we must find out is how they knew the right dormitory and the right bed with such certainty that they could carry out the whole operation without waking a soul."

Moore replied, "I can give you four possible answers. They could have seen the dormitory lists in Matron's room. Some boy in the dormitory could have answered a question by a stranger in Werley or during last Sunday's walk. The information could have been obtained from one of the maids, but I doubt if she could have given it offhand, she would have had to come up into the dormitory and look. And finally, the boy himself might have told someone."

"Very well put, sir. That just about tallies with my ideas. So right away, we will question the matron, every boy in the dormitory, and the two maids."

Moore said, "Wouldn't it be a good thing to put out a warning, a general warning to police all round, before we do anything else?"

Inspector Witing smiled. "The first warning went out as soon as I heard from Constable Weir at Werley. The sergeant went off to send out further details when I had finished with your Mr. Commer and Tyson. Now, what about the matron, the maids and the boys, sir?"

Mr. Moore grinned. "Sorry, Inspector. I was doing you an injustice. We will go down to the matron and the maids now, while I send a messenger for the boys."

The matron was able to confirm that nobody outside Beetham had seen the dormitory lists for that term. The maids assured the inspector that no one had made any enquiries from them about any boy in one of the dormitories. Inspector Witing asked that all the Dormitory B boys should be sent up to the dormitory. They were all there, an eager, excited group, when he arrived.

"Now, boys," he said, "you all know what has happened. One of your schoolmates has been kidnapped. As yet, we are unable to say why, but it may be because he is a millionaire's son and a ransom will be asked for. The point we are anxious to clear up at the moment is how the men who took him off knew which dormitory he was in and where his bed was. It occurred to Mr. Moore and to me that somebody may have put a question to one of you boys. Now can any of you remember having been asked a question about the dormitory that Denver was in, or the position of his bed in Dormitory B?"

A chorus of rather subdued 'No's' and similar negative expressions was the only reply.

"Ah, well," the Inspector said, a trifle disappointed, "perhaps I was banking too much on getting a line on someone through one of you young fellows. But, if you can't help me, that's not your fault."

Mr. Moore was on the point of telling the boys to return to their respective classes, when a hand was raised and one boy tentatively said, "Please, sir, I don't know whether it will help, but I think I know something."

The inspector turned eagerly towards the boy.

Moore said, "What is it, Thomas? Tell us anything you can. We want all the help we can get."

"Well, sir, last Friday a tall man was with Mr. Commer outside the schoolroom. I saw Mr. Commer point Denver out to him, and as I was passing, I heard the word 'dormitory' mentioned, and then Mr. Commer and the man went upstairs. I don't suppose it's any-

thing, because Mr. Commer was there, but I thought I'd better mention it."

"Thank you, Thomas. That may be just the clue we are looking for. All right, boys, back to your classes."

The inspector emitted a sigh of relief. "That's the first gleam of light we've had. It sounds very hopeful to me. I'd like to see Mr. Commer again, right away. I wonder why he did not mention it before."

"There is probably a reason why he did not connect the two events. I'll get him over at once. Come down to my study. After you have seen Mr. Commer, the headmaster would like to see you. I'll take you over."

Mr. Moore got busy on the inter-house and classroom telephone, with the result that five minutes later Mr. Commer tapped on the door and came into the study.

Mr. Moore said, "Tell me, Commer, did you have a visitor last Friday, who went up to the dormitory?"

"Oh yes," Commer admitted. "But that was Mr. Greatorex, who has taken the Grange, and may be sending his son here."

"I see. You didn't mention it to the inspector, because it never occurred to you that there could be any connection between your Mr. Greatorex and the disappearance of young Denver."

"Well, I ask you!" Commer seemed dumbfounded at the very idea. "What possible connection could there be between him and kidnappers?"

Here the inspector broke in and said soothingly, "It's just that we like to investigate every possible

source of information. Did you in fact go up to the dormitory with this Mr. Greatorex?"

"Oh yes. He was interested in the accommodation. Parents usually like to see where their boys are going to sleep. So I took him up to Dormitory B."

"Had you any particular reason for taking him to the dormitory where young Denver slept?"

Commer hesitated. "Well, no, not really. As a matter of fact, we are rather proud of having Sir Harry Denver's son at Beetham, and I had already pointed the boy out to Mr. Greatorex. He asked if Denver had a special room. I told him, 'Of course not. We have no favourites at Beetham.' I took him to Dormitory B to show him Denver's bed, so that he could see that it was exactly like any other bed there."

"Was that all that happened?" Witing continued.

"Yes, that was all. Oh, I think Mr. Greatorex opened the window and looked out. He asked if a boy in a near bed would feel a draught, and I assured him that if a boy complained we should attend to it at once."

Witing seemed satisfied. "Well, I'm much obliged, Mr. Commer. I shall probably have a few words with Mr. Greatorex. He may have innocently told someone where Denver's bed was, and if he did, that's the party I'm looking for."

"That's all right then, Commer. Many thanks," Mr. Moore added, and the junior master left the study.

The inspector turned to Mr. Moore. "If you'll forgive me saying so, sir, your Mr. Commer seems to be a very credulous young man. If I had wanted to plan this abduction, I should have done exactly what this Mr.

Greatorrex did. He even went to the window and opened it to get the layout. I can hardly wait to start investigating his background. I wonder how your Mr. Commer met him?"

"That I cannot say. I know that Commer had dinner at the Grange last week. He appeared to have been quite dazzled by this fellow Greatorrex. But if you are in a hurry and want to see the headmaster, we'll go along now. I'll tell him we are coming."

Mr. Moore telephoned through and Dr. Mansfield replied, "The sooner the better."

Dr. Mansfield's house was only a short distance from Beetham, and Mr. Moore and the inspector walked over. The headmaster opened the door himself.

"Come in, Charles. Come in, Inspector; forgive my not seeing you till now, but you were in able hands. Do sit down."

Dr. Mansfield sat at his desk and the others took easy chairs.

"Now, Inspector, what can you tell me about this unfortunate business. I have postponed notifying the boy's father until I had seen you. It is not a pleasant business notifying a parent that his son has been kidnapped from your school. Do you confirm that he has been kidnapped?"

"Everything points that way, sir. What has been worrying us is how they knew which dormitory and which bed the boy occupied. We have eliminated everyone who might have given that information to a stranger, and in the last ten minutes we have got a line on a man who was in the dormitory last week and had the boy's bed pointed out to him."

The inspector repeated what Commer had told him.

"It is a curious coincidence, to say the least. Parents usually come to see me when they want to enter their sons. When will you see this Mr. Greatorex?"

"I should like to get away at once," the inspector replied. "I could come back and see you afterwards, if you would like me to, sir."

"That will suit me admirably. I will postpone cabling the boy's father until I have seen you, Inspector."

They all rose, and Mr. Moore and the inspector were leaving when the inspector stopped and turned to Dr. Mansfield and said,

"It may not have occurred to you, sir, that this is world news. You are liable to have the news hounds down at any time. And I wouldn't postpone cabling the boy's father too long, or the papers may get it out first in South Africa. And, if I might offer you a word of advice, if you give the news boys an interview, you'll find they'll help. But if you try to shut them out, they can make things very unpleasant."

"Thank you very much, Inspector. I can see that you are quite right. I shall not see them, but Mr. Moore will. Sorry to foist this on you, Charles, but you will be better at this interviewing than I should be. Warn the lodge keeper to send any news reporters to you, and tell the exchange to put any trunk calls through to your number."

"Will you accept the bill for overtime, or shall I send it to the Governors?" Moore said with a grin, as he and the inspector went out.

Mr. Moore went to Beetham, and the inspector to his car, where the sergeant and constable awaited him.

"Any news about the ladder, Sergeant?"

"No, Inspector. It wasn't a school ladder that was used. We've checked on all three ladders that belong to the school."

"Well, that can wait. We're going to the Grange now."

The driver turned the car, went through the school main gates and headed for Werley. On the way, Inspector Witing told of Greateorex's visit to the dormitory.

"Queer business. Fits pretty close though," the sergeant commented. "It'd make things easier if the father was in this country and we could find out if he'd been contacted."

Witing replied, "We shall know as soon as he's been contacted. I've heard this Harry Denver is a very hot member. I shouldn't be surprised if the Yard was down here by this time tomorrow."

The big double gates of the Grange drive were shut. Bulge, the Naval pensioner, came out from the lodge when the police car tooted its siren. He opened the gates when Inspector Witing said he wished to see Mr. Greateorex. When the police car had passed through, Bulge rang up the Grange to report the visitors. These were his instructions from Greateorex. The result was that Griff opened the door immediately the inspector rang. Bulge from the lodge had only mentioned police, so that when Witing and a constable entered the Grange, Griff was unaware that the sergeant had been dropped halfway up the drive.

The inspector and constable were shown into the library, where Greatorex awaited them.

"Good morning, officer. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" Greatorex greeted them.

Witing came to the point at once.

"A boy has disappeared from Ramsden College, and we believe he has been kidnapped. He is young Henry Denver, son of Sir Harry Denver, the South African millionaire."

"That is a most unusual crime in this country, is it not? More common in the States than here. And where do I come into it?"

"I should have thought you would have guessed that, sir, as you were up in the dormitory and had the boy pointed out to you last Friday."

"That is correct, but I fail to see the connection."

"The connection is just this, Mr. Greatorex. We have been unable to discover how the men who abducted the boy last night knew which bed and which dormitory he was in. Our enquiries so far have failed to find anybody outside the college who could have had that information, excepting you. That is why I have called...to find out if, unwittingly, you have passed that information on to some person or persons, who might be the kidnappers. Can you recollect having given that information to anyone since last Friday?"

Greatorex, with an elbow on either arm of the chair, and his chin resting on his clasped hands, regarded the inspector while he thought. After a few moments, he shook his head.

"I fear you will have to look elsewhere for the in-

formant, Officer. I have spoken to nobody about it. I couldn't even remember where the boy's bed is. Sorry I cannot help you."

Greatorex stood up as an indication that the interview was ended, but the inspector remained seated.

"Will you give me your full name and address please, Mr. Greatorex?"

Greatorex was a trifle short in his reply. "What am I, a witness in the box? Derek Greatorex is the name. The address is the Grange, Werley."

The inspector was quite unperturbed. "Nothing like that Mr. Greatorex. We naturally have to make a report of everyone interviewed, and we have to know something about them to decide how much reliance we can place in their statements. Would you mind giving me your business address?"

"Certainly, Greatorex and Company, 21 Fenchapel Street, London, E.C.4. Imports and Exports. We are in the book."

The constable took it all down in his notebook. Now that the inspector had the information which would enable him to check up on Greatorex's background, he stood up.

"Thank you, sir. That is all, then. But if you should happen to remember mentioning the dormitory or bed to anyone, I shall be most grateful if you will let me know."

Greatorex chuckled. "I can assure you, officer, that there is nothing the matter with my memory."

"That's all right then, sir. Thank you very much. Good morning."

Griff showed them out. Looking through a narrow

window he saw the car stop and pick up a policeman who stepped out from behind a tree.

Returning to the library he said, "What did the queer fellow want? Have they got anything on us?"

"No. Routine work, that is all," Greatorex replied. "Apparently it has come out that I was at the school last Friday, and a master showed me the boy's bed."

"I don't like it all the same. You should've left it to me. I'd have got all the dope and no one the wiser."

"No one is any the wiser now, Griff. I was a perfectly ordinary parent visiting the school with a view to sending my son there. The inspector has left completely satisfied with my explanation."

"Then all I can say is, 'e's deceivin' yer, for 'e 'ad a copper in the grounds. The car stopped and 'e 'opped in 'alfway down the drive."

"I imagine that he was leaving no stone unturned, looking for the ladder. I presume you returned it to the farm."

"Course we did. And what a junket we 'ad. Goin', there was two of us carryin' the ladder. Comin' back, Baker 'ad the boy, and the ladder, 'owever I 'eld it, took lumps of skin off me."

"Never mind, Griff. Your share of the pay-off will make up for that."

"I 'ope so. When 'e come round, the kid was sick. Baker's watchin' 'im now."

"Good. Well, you relieve Baker and tell him to bring the car round. I am going to Salisbury to cable, and we shall have lunch there. We should be back about three. If you have to leave the boy, be certain you lock the door."



, CHAPTER SIX

Night Raid

"ANY luck, sergeant?" Inspector Witing enquired, as the car stopped halfway down the Grange drive and the sergeant got in.

"Not a thing," the sergeant replied. "The stables are turned into a garage. There's a ladder on the wall, but it's too short. There's a few outbuildings, but none of 'em could have taken a long ladder. You told me not more than ten minutes, so I couldn't do more than look through a window as I passed, but I shouldn't say the boy was in any of those."

"We didn't do much better," the inspector stated. "Of course, it's early days yet. I couldn't grill him as though we had a charge against him. He admitted having been at the school last Friday, but that was all.

One little point struck me. Can you remember where the boy's bed was?"

"Yes, fourth from the window, on the right, looking at the window."

"Exactly. But he said he couldn't remember where the bed was, which is funny considering the master pointed out which bed young Denver slept in, and he asked if a boy would feel a draught from the window. A minute later he told me there was nothing wrong with his memory. Anyhow, we've got the name of his firm in London, so we can get his background dug out."

The inspector went straight back to Ramsden and saw Dr. Mansfield. He had no hopeful news, so the headmaster sent off a cable to Sir Harry Denver saying that his son appeared to have been kidnapped; the matter was in the hands of the police, who were making enquiries, but, as yet, had no news. After leaving the headmaster, the inspector passed Greatorex's address to Salisbury and told them to send it up to London with a request for life history and background information urgently. Then he and the sergeant began making the rounds of local farms looking for the ladder that had been used.

At midday, when morning school finished, the four from the Corner hurried back to discuss the position.

Pat was the first to arrive, Crew and Mortimer came in next and last Hamil. When Hamil arrived the argument was waxing fast and furious.

"There is time if we go now and miss dinner," Pat was saying. "Here's Ham. You'll come with me, won't

you, Ham? We can go through the gap in the hedge by No. 1 playing field, and catch that bus that passes at twenty past——”

Crew, with a little smile, said, “You are quite mad, Pat. You risk expulsion for yourself and Ham, and drag my name in the mud for not reporting absence from dinner. And all for what? To report the doubtful presence of Denver at the Grange.”

“What do ye mean, doubtful? There can be no doubt of it. Who else would kidnap the boy? Didn’t we hear him planning it all? He may be tied hand and foot there now, and we doing nothing about it.”

A knock at the door. “May I come in?” Marshall himself appeared. “I rather thought there would be hot argument, with the three of you holding Pat back. I hope my authority may help to influence the impetuous Hibernian.”

“No names, no hard feelings, sir,” Crew said. “But your thought wasn’t far out.”

“What were you going to say, sir?” Pat asked eagerly.

“Just that I have some more information. The police discovered that Greatorrex was up in the dormitory, and he was shown which bed Denver occupied. It seems that he visited Mr. Commer last Friday, says he is thinking of sending his son here. The police inspector went to see him this morning. He admitted having been up in the dormitory and seeing the bed, but says he never passed on the information to anyone, and it seems that there is not enough evidence to demand a statement or make an accusation. But, to my mind,

what it all boils down to is that, if Greatorrex is holding Denver, I do not think there is any danger, so there is no need to rush in, Pat. I will get special leave tomorrow afternoon, for the four of you, and we will make our expedition tomorrow instead of Sunday. So don't do anything which may get you into trouble. Get this into your head. We do not know that Greatorrex has abducted Denver. And from the look of things at the moment, it is quite possible that he has not. Until we have seen Denver in the Grange, we must not breathe a suggestion that Greatorrex has had anything to do with his disappearance. I think he is a dangerous man and might sue the school for libel. That is all I have to say, and I hope it is sufficient to restrain any impetuous action. The rendezvous is at the main gates at five past two tomorrow afternoon."

The door closed and Marshall was gone.

"Now are you satisfied, Pat?" Crew asked.

"Aye. I suppose there is nothing more to be said. But it is still a great disappointment to me. This trip tomorrow is almost an officially organised school outing, complete with master. There'll be no risk, and hardly any thrills. I like a nefarious enterprise, where the risk of being found out doubles the excitement. I suppose it's the rebel blood in me that takes a special delight in breaking the law. I can't help it, it's the way I'm made."

Mortimer said quietly, "Twaddle and Hibernistic balderdash. The weak man's excuse for doing something he knows he ought not to do."

Pat retorted, "And will the Professor explain the

source of the urge to break the law, if it's not my Irish blood."

"Certainly. It is nothing to do with your blood. If it was you might have difficulty in overcoming it. It is your perverse Irish spirit, and that is something that can be taught the difference between right and wrong."

"I won't contradict a thing you say, Professor. But ye still haven't explained why the spirit prefers the wrong to the right."

"Of course I haven't. I don't want to say anything unpleasant about whoever was responsible for bringing you up."

"Here, you two," Crew interrupted. "Stop it. There'll be a rift in the lute in a minute. Don't let him egg you on, Mort. You know what he is, and you can't argue with him."

"Two to one, I give in," Pat said, grinning. "If there hadn't been all this crazy opposition, we'd have been in the bus now, Ham, on the way to an exciting adventure. You'd have come with me, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe," Ham replied. "Can't say. It is usually my fate to be caught up and dragged into the whirlpool of your crazy parties. I come because I feel a moral responsibility for seeing you safe home."

"I'll bet you'd have come if there hadn't been all that opposition," Pat insisted.

The topic was dropped and Pat resigned himself to being a member of the organised party with Marshall, on the morrow; and all would have been well had not Pat and Ham, coming out of afternoon school, chanced to meet Marshall.

"The latest news," Marshall said as he fell into step beside them, "is that Sir Harry Denver has offered a reward of ten thousand pounds for information leading to the rescue of his son and the capture of the criminals. The Head has just received a cable authorising him to announce that. It is quite possible that by this time tomorrow we five may be worth two thousand apiece."

"It is a terrible amount of money, that," Hamil said.

"It's obvious why he's done it," Marshall said. "He hopes that some lesser member of the abduction gang will be tempted to double-cross his associates and sell out to the police for the reward."

"Then by hook or by crook, we must get there first," Pat stated. "Fortunately they won't hear of it till tomorrow, so there is a good chance that we'll do them out of it. If we get it, it'll be honourable money, well deserved, but if the crooks get it, it'll be blood money and'll do them no good."

"I'm afraid they have a twenty-four-hour start of us," Marshall said. "The Head gave permission, and Mr. Moore passed the information on to the gentlemen of the Press this afternoon, so it will be in the evening papers tonight. Still, I do not suppose that anyone will come forward. See you tomorrow at five past two."

Marshall turned off towards his own house. Pat and Hamil continued towards Beetham. Pat was deep in thought.

"I know what's on your mind," Hamil said.

"Yes, I can't endure the thought of all that money going to one of those chaps."

"If we could tell the police tonight, it's pretty certain we'd be first with the news."

"That's what I'm thinking. We'd share out with Crewee and Mort, but I don't know that Marshall deserves a share."

"I think he should be included," Hamil maintained. "If he hadn't given us the news, we shouldn't have known about it till tomorrow, and that would have just about spoiled our chance, whereas knowing about it now pretty well makes us the favourites."

"You're right," Pat agreed. "We'll give Marshall a share. Now the point is, when can we go? I think we'll have to see prop. through."

"If we should be caught, I think it would mean the sack," Hamil said. "But I'm willing to risk it for that amount of money."

"I don't think it would be the sack," Pat contended. "Because we are doing it in order to save Denver."

"I hadn't overlooked that point myself."

Pat grinned. "I don't think I'd recognise Denver if I saw him. The term's not old enough yet for me to know all the new kids."

"I know him," Hamil said, "because I made a point of it. I wanted to see what a millionaire's son looked like."

Before they reached Beetham, Pat said, "We won't mention the reward, in case they have not heard of it."

"Oh, they'll have heard," Hamil replied. "But we will speak of it in a light manner as though it were some item in a newspaper which did not concern us."

At about the same time, Crew and Mortimer were

walking back together from school. They also had had word of the fabulous reward offered by Sir Harry Denver.

"It would be amusing if we found ourselves in a position to claim this reward," Mortimer remarked.

"Could be," Crew agreed. "Pity it had to come out today. I'm afraid of the effect on Pat and Ham. Money means more to them than it does to you and me. They both know what it is to be short. I shouldn't be surprised if they sneak out tonight, and, if they find Denver, phone the police and claim the reward."

"We must stop them. If they are caught it would mean expulsion."

"I don't think so, not if they found Denver. Also, I don't want to interfere if I can avoid it. They are old enough to decide for themselves what is worth risking and what isn't."

Mortimer grinned. "Of course they may not have heard of the reward," he said. "I suggest we say nothing about it. If they have heard of it, we'll treat it as a joke, one has heard of these huge sums being offered, but who ever heard of one being paid?"

"Yes. That's the idea. We'll do that."

As a result, when they opened the door and went into the 'Corner and found Pat and Hamil there, each pair was unusually silent, waiting to see if the other would remark on the reward. When no mention was forthcoming, Pat and Crew each started to speak, to cover up the suspicious silence.

"Sorry, Crew," Pat said.

"What were you going to say?" Crew asked.

"We're all being very polite all at once," Hamil said.

"I think Denver is the disturbing factor," Mortimer remarked. "By this time tomorrow he should be near release, and we shall be able to pick up our ordinary life of back-chat and leg-pull. When I hear Pat and Crewee apologising for interrupting each other, I wonder if I have wandered into some other study by mistake. Of course——"

Pat broke in, "Oh, go and swallow your miserable monologue, Professor, and I hope it chokes you. I'll tell you what the trouble is. We're all of us behaving unnaturally because we're each hiding something from the other. So here goes. We heard about the reward, and it's as plain as a pikestaff that the 'grown-ups' in the party are worried in case the children do something naughty, being tempted by the money. And that's all I'm going to say."

"Very well," Crew replied. "And what I want to say——"

"I don't want to hear it," Pat stated.

"If you don't hear it, you'll be carrying the can back to yourself all next week."

"And is that another of your Naval expressions that means nothing to the longshoreman?"

"Longshorechild is the word. It means blaming yourself."

"Very well, say it, but I'm not listening."

"I was about to say that after prep. Mort and I will be visiting, and as we are feeling unusually sleepy, we shall go to bed early. And that is the bow and stern of my statement."

With a broad grin, Pat replied, "And that is all I want to hear. I'll mention both of you in my prayers tonight."

For the remainder of the evening the subject of the reward was not mentioned in the Corner. Outside, in every study, in corridors, in the classroom, wherever two boys met, the abduction and the reward were the only topics of conversation. Friday evening's prep. was always a serious affair, an effort to turn 'do' into 'done' for the weekend. When the clock in Big Hall tower struck eight, Crew and Mortimer put their books away, said 'Chcer ho,' and without another word went out, closing the door behind them.

Muttering, "Good old Crewec and Mort. There's not another pair like them," Pat put his books away. "Now, I'll go down and dump our raincoats out of the window. There'll be no one in the changing-room now. Then I'll stroll out and pick them up and be waiting for you at the corner of the quad. Give me two minutes, not longer."

"Right-ho," Hamil replied.

Pat opened the door, and stepped back, as Mr. Commer walked in.

"Good evening, Corner House...Hullo, only half the complement. Not a difference of opinion, I trust. You were about to go out, Pat. Don't let me stop you. I can talk to Hamil."

"That's all right, sir," Pat said, sitting resignedly in a chair. "Do sit down. Crew and Mortimer have gone visiting. Hamil and I were off ourselves. We often go visiting on Friday night."

Mr. Commer sat down. "And I can make a good guess what the topic for discussion would be tonight."

Pat was angry at the unexpected delay and Commer's stupidity in remaining, when he said they were going visiting. He said, "Sure there'll be only one topic tonight, the inclusion of Redmond in the team for the Winchester match."

Commer sat up. "What? ... The Winchester match? Good heavens, no. Surely Denver's abduction and his father's reward for information will have top priority in all discussions."

"Oh that?" Pat scoffed at the idea. "We've talked that dry, sir. We've got down to subjects nearer home and dearer to our hearts."

It began to dawn on Commer that he might be more welcome elsewhere. He rose and said, "You are ahead of me, then. I am still on the abduction topic. I had hoped to get some new angles on it from the advanced thinkers in the Corner. Perhaps I should have done if the 'brains' had been here. I will hope for better luck next time. Good night."

When the door closed behind him, Pat exclaimed, "Of all the cheek. Commer trying to be sarky with us."

"The laugh was with us," Hamil contended. "We could have given him so many new angles on the abduction, he would have stayed awake all night thinking about them. And tomorrow, when he hears that we have found Denver, he'll remember his visit here this evening, and he'll know how much we are laughing at him. Now, away you go, Pat. I'll give you two minutes."

Pat felt in his pockets to make sure his knife and money were there. He had already placed the torches in the pockets of the raincoats hanging in the changing-rooms.

"All right, two minutes," he said as he went out.

As he had expected, no one was in the changing-rooms. He lifted the two raincoats from their pegs, felt the pockets to be certain the torches were there, and took them to the window through which he expected to return that night. The catch was broken and, although shut, it could be opened from the outside. He glanced at the catch and saw that it had not been repaired. He opened the window and dropped the raincoats into the playground. It would never do to be seen with them making for the playground door. He strolled out of the changing-rooms, down the long corridor, and, with nobody in sight, quickly opened the door and went out. He closed the door, went along and picked up the raincoats, then hurried back to the corner of the quad. He had not been there a minute before Hamil was beside him in the darkness. They put on their raincoats and set off at a smart pace across the playing fields.

They passed quickly the lighted windows of Werley, and it was during the two-mile walk along the dark road beyond that Pat said, "You know, Ham, I have the unpleasant feeling that we may have some difficulty in finding the entrance in this darkness.

"I shall know it well enough," Hamil replied. "When I stood there for half an hour, before I came in to look for you the first time, the details of that spot

fixed itself in my memory. I would know it with my eyes shut."

"That's just as well, for I don't want to show our torches, if we can avoid it, till we're in the passage."

In due course, Hamil announced that they had arrived, and they climbed up into the hedge.

"That's very clever, Ham. This is the same little sapling that I swung myself up with last time."

Inside the wood was a different proposition. Pat led the way, full of confidence, but he had not gone five yards before he stopped.

"I could never have imagined things could look so different. As a matter of fact they don't look at all. It's just darkness that catches and scratches every time you move. I believe Crewee counted the steps to the road. I wish I had asked him."

"I think you are going right. Just keep moving," Hamil said.

They pressed on, forcing their way through brambles and scrub undergrowth. Twice they found they were attempting the impossible, trying to get through the centre of a thick bramble clump.

"It's no good, we'll have to use our torches," Pat said at last, and immediately dropped with a crash into a hole.

"Are you all right, Pat?" Hamil cried.

Pat's torch flashed almost at Hamil's feet.

"Yes, come on. Didn't I mention it? We've arrived," Pat replied in as nonchalant a tone as possible.

"Talk about the luck of the Irish," Hamil said as he lowered himself into the hole.

The next minute they were in the passage.

"Glory be, we've made it," Pat said. "Now for the spirit of the terror room. As soon as we begin to feel it, we'll start laughing."

They had not gone far before they felt the tide of apprehension rising.

"I've got it," Pat said. "Start laughing. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha ha!"

Hamil behind Pat produced a kind of mechanical cackle, and waited for the feeling to diminish, but, instead, the fearful apprehension grew till Hamil felt he was losing the power to control his limbs, and going weak at the knees. Despite the terror that gripped him, he continued uttering the weirdest sounds that ever went under the name of laughter.

Pat turned and flashed his torch on Hamil.

"What're ye doing, laying eggs?" he exclaimed, and something in his tone, coupled with the echo of Hamil's throaty cackles beating down from the low roof, made them both burst into genuine fits of laughter. Immediately, the apprehension and terror vanished.

"It's gone," Hamil exclaimed with relief. "Don't stop, man. Let us get on. When we reach the other side I'll explain."

"O.K.," Pat said, and they hurried on, through the terror chamber itself and into the passage beyond. They had no sooner entered, than Hamil cried,

"Run, Pat. It's got me in the back."

"It's got me too," Pat replied and, bending low, he broke into a double, with Hamil behind, tailing on to

his raincoat. As they proceeded, the fears gradually disappeared. They eased their pace and walked with bowed heads.

Hamil said, "Tell me, Pat. Did the feeling get you as we were going in, and then stop when you began to laugh the first time?"

"No, it got worse all the time, so I stopped laughing and determined to ignore it. But it got so bad, I turned round to see if yours had stopped, and then I realised what a crazy artificial cackle you were doing, and it tickled me so much I asked if you were laying eggs, and that made you laugh too. So what we've discovered is that only genuine laughter kills the fear."

"Yes, that is what I think too. It's the spirit of laughter that frightens it, not the sound."

"We have not yet found," Pat said, "if it's strong enough to stop you reaching the chamber."

"You mean, if you couldn't find a way of checking it. I would certainly say that it was. My legs were nearly paralysed with fright, when you turned round and made me laugh."

"In that case, we shall have to think of something really funny on the way back. But I'm thinking we shall be so full of ourselves with thoughts of the reward, that no spooky frightfulness will be able to stop us."

They continued in silence until Pat's torch picked up the steps leading into the Grange.

"I'll try Crewce's technique. Now it's been lifted once, it'll probably come easy. Keep your torch on the crack, Ham."

Pat pocketed his torch and ascended to the fourth

step. This was too near for him, as he was taller than Crew. He stepped down and, facing Hamil, and with a hand on the wall each side, heaved with his back against the stone. Hamil exclaimed as the crack appeared, and Pat jerked his shoulder to one side. He had succeeded, and slid the slab across. He did the same with the second slab, then they climbed the stairs into the passage.

"We'll have a peep into the room first," Pat whispered.

They moved to the ramp and climbed up on to the platform. Pat gently pushed the slide back and they looked down into the lighted library. Greatorex was sitting at a table with many papers on it. He was writing, and now and again making notes on a pad beside him. Suddenly he put down his pen and stood up and looked straight up at them. For the fraction of an instant, Pat's hand started to slide the panel back. Then he realised they could not have been seen. Greatorex was simply looking up at the coat of arms. He moved over to the wall and rang a bell. Griff came in.

"How is he?" Greatorex asked.

"'E 'ad 'is supper, then Baker told 'im. Took it as quiet as a lamb, 'e did. Baker told 'im as long as 'e be'aved 'imself 'e wouldn't be 'urt, which is good, the wolf tellin' the lamb to be quiet. Baker told 'im the sooner 'is father paid up, the sooner 'e'd be back at school. The lamb never let out a bleat."

"Have you taken his clothes away and locked the door?"

"I 'ave that. And 'e'll need wings if 'e tries the window."

"Have you taken the sheets away?"

"I 'ave. All 'e's got is two blankets and an eiderdown. If 'e makes a rope out of that, 'e's a better man than I am. Look, Guv'nor, what's yer worry? If it was me or Baker up in that room, you'd 'ave something to worry about, but 'e's a twelve-year-old kid, and quiet at that, and 'e's locked in a upper room. What've you got to worry about?"

"I am not worried, but I am not allowing any oversight to take away my pleasure at picturing Harry Denver's feelings at this moment. Skips is in Jo'burg now. He will have told Harry Denver what he must do if he wants his boy back." Greatorex began pacing to and fro while he spoke, his face grim and his fists clenched. "And what he must do will crack his heart, and when he has done it and finds the boy is dead, his heart will break, and I shall be happy."

When he had finished speaking, the expression on his face was that of a madman. Griff eyed him stolidly. He said, "Take it easy, Guv'nor. You want a drink. And the kid's not going to die, for if 'e does, we'll do a Charlie on you."

Greatorex regarded Griff for a moment as though he were a stranger, then the puzzled expression on his face cleared, and he said, "No, the boy must not die. I did not mean that. But Harry Denver must think he is dead, for a time at least. Then I shall be satisfied. That will break him."

"Don't be too sure of that. Harry Denver's tough."

"In business, yes. But he has an Achilles' heel, his son, and that is where I get him."

"Well, I s'pose you know what you're doing. If there's nothing else you want, I'm going to bed."

"That's all right, Griff. You go to bed. Good night."

Griff went out. Greatorex returned to the table and resumed his writing.

The boys watched in silence for a few minutes, but nothing further happened. Pat nudged his companion gently and whispered, "Well, that's that. We know he's here. We'd better be going." He was about to push the slide back into position, when the door of the room opened and three men came in.





CHAPTER SEVEN

Pat is Taken

GREATOREX looked up as the three men lined themselves in front of the table.

"Well?" he said quietly.

One of the men spoke. It was Baker, the chauffeur, though Pat and Hamil did not know this, as they watched and listened. All they knew was that he seemed to be the most truculent of the three, although he spoke so softly they could only just hear him.

"We heard the nine o'clock news. I guess you didn't."

Greatorex raised his eyebrows and shook his head. He appeared not to be very interested.

Baker continued, "Harry Denver has called your

hand. He's offering ten thousand pounds for news of the boy, and no questions asked. And the radio says farms and houses are being searched, and all cars coming from this area. What do we do now?"

"That is very foolish of Harry Denver. Skips warned him if he went to the police or offered a reward, he would never see the boy again."

"Maybe he was warned, but you know his reputation. You can't bluff him or put the black on him. I'll lay the odds he'll have Scotland Yard down here tomorrow, and if the Yard get busy down here, I don't like to think what may happen. We got no friends here. It's a strange country. Why not get to London, where we got friends, and you can do things without everyone for ten miles round knowing about it?"

Greatorrex nodded his head. "There is something in what you say, Baker. I have had the feeling myself that if I use the telephone, my words are passed round the district as news."

"That's right, Guv'nor," Griff put in. "Anything any of us does is news. You'd think we was film stars."

"There is always the risk that the man who runs away proclaims his guilt, but we have the excuse that we only came down as an experiment and we do not like the country. However, the thing is impossible, the searching of cars prevents any move away from the house, so that is that."

Baker replied. "That searching of cars don't cut any ice. We've got that canvas bag. Dope the kid and put him in that, lying along the back of the boot, with our luggage in front. Me, in uniform, driving. When the

coppers stop us, you behind reading the *Times*. When a man's reading the *Times*, it puts him right with the coppers pronto. When he pokes his head in, you say casual like, 'Search the car? Certainly. Open the boot, Baker, and while you are there, get that satchel of papers out.' It's probable he won't look in the boot, and if he does, when he sees me pulling out suitcases and grumbling at not finding the satchel quick, he'll only glance and pass us through. We've got the flat in London, and we can keep the kid there till Harry Denver pays up, as he will when the coppers draw a blank. Another thing, you can get in touch with Skips easy from London. If you do it here, the whole place'll know the message inside half an hour."

Looking down on the scene, Pat and Hamil were entranced, almost spellbound, by this real-life drama. They waited breathlessly for Greatorex's reaction to Baker's argument.

Greatorex was thinking hard. He said, "You would have made a good lawyer, Baker. I agree with everything you say. Your plan for passing the road block is masterly. But it is too soon after the event. We must wait at least a week. I should be happy if they searched the house. We could put the boy in the priest's hole. They would never find him there, and after that we should be free from any suspicion."

Pat and Hamil stiffened at the mention of the priest's hole. The memory came back to Pat of their first visit and hurried exit from the hole. He remembered the shock of hearing voices when he had opened the secret door into the library; his rapid closing of

the door and Crew's orders to get out quickly. And he was quite sure that he had failed to lock the door by turning the disc back. Anyone pushing the library shelves would easily open the door and then discover the hole. And that would mean that his bag had gone, and he was relying on the spare batteries it contained to replenish his and Ham's torches. These thoughts flashed through his mind. Baker was speaking again.

"Look, Guv'nor. It's clear to me that you've got no idea about Scotland Yard. Bloodhounds on the scent isn't in it with them. They're uncanny, the way they nose things out. We came here expecting no trouble and Harry Denver paying up pronto. Now he's dug his heels in, we don't know if we'll ever see the colour of his dough. You promised us five thousand apiece, and if he pays up, we know you'll cough up. But if he doesn't pay up, it may mean a long wait. It might pay us better to take a third of ten thousand each." Suddenly Baker's expressionless face lit up with sinister determination as he almost hissed out, "And that is what we are going to do if you decide to stay on in this place. You can take it or leave it. If we go to London, we stick by you. If you stay here, we're turning you in and collecting that ten thousand."

Greatorrex stood up, and the three tensed ready for an outburst, or even an attack, but neither materialised. He began walking up and down, completely ignoring them standing there. Suddenly he stopped, turned and faced them.

"Very well, you leave me no option. We will go to town. Have you enough chloroform left to deal with the boy?"

"Plenty," Griff replied.

"Then we will make an early start. Eight o'clock breakfast, nine o'clock leave in the car. Do not give the boy any breakfast before you put him off, just a cup of tea. Don't put him off till five minutes before we start."

Baker said, "Good enough, Guv'nor. That's settled then. I notice you didn't tell us to be careful not to overdo the chloroform."

Greatorex replied, "It is immaterial to me whether he dies at your hands or mine."

His tone was so cold-blooded that it almost caused a shudder to run up the spines of the two listeners above. Even Baker looked a little surprised.

"While we're on the subject," he said, "I'd like to know whether you're going to return the kid or not."

Greatorex turned on him with a snarl like a wild animal. "That's my business. Whatever happens you will get your blood money, and there your interest ends."

He was so much taller, and looked so much stronger than Baker, that the two watchers above expected him to pick the chauffeur up and tear him apart. Baker did not flinch, but he took a step back.

"All right, all right. That's your business. There's no need to get excited about it," he said. "I just wanted to know, that's all. Now you've told me...Come on, Griff and Cookie. Breakfast at eight tomorrow."

Greatorex stood glaring silently at them as they left the room. When the door closed, he raised his clenched fists and muttered imprecations towards the door. Then he dropped his hands to his side and appeared

to regain control of himself. He returned to the table and continued his writing.

Pat pushed the slide back, closing the aperture.

"Let's get down, Ham, where we can talk," he whispered.

Hamil eased himself down the ramp, and Pat followed.

"I wish there was a light. You can think accurately when you can see things," Hamil said. "This black darkness seems to dim the mind."

"We'll have to think in the darkness, Ham, nevertheless. If he knows of the priest's hole, he'll have found my bag with the spare batteries, so we've got to make these last. We'll only use one at a time, for I'm thinking we've a deal to do. Did ye ever hear the like? They think no more of murdering a human soul than we'd think of squashing a fly."

"We'd best get along to the police right away."

"No, Ham. We must find where he is first, so that we can tell them exactly."

"But he's in some room at the top of the house. We cannot tell if there is an upstairs to these secret passages."

"Then we must find out. It shouldn't take long."

"No, Pat. I'm against it. It is more important to tell the police first."

"I'll tell ye what. If we don't find it in fifteen minutes, we'll go straight for the police. That's fair enough, Ham. Come on."

"All right, but I have never yet known one of your ideas that did not end up in the worst kind of trouble. Start away then."

Pat set off in the opposite direction from the priest's hole. He came to the cross passage at the end.

"Now which way," he queried. "We'll let your sane judgement take a hand. You decide."

"I am invariably right," Hamil replied, "so we will turn right."

"If it were me, I should go left, but we'll accept your decision."

Pat turned right and soon came to another cross passage.

"I'll decide this time," he said, and turned left. At once they came to very steep steps, almost like a ladder, leading up to the second storey. The reason for their steepness was the window at the end of the great hall, which went right up to the ceiling. The passage in which they now found themselves was nothing like as high as the ones on the ground floor. At intervals the light of the torch picked up narrow sliding slabs, the peep-holes into various bedrooms. These were at an average man's eye level.

Pat said, "We won't stop to look into any room till we see the extent of this upstairs place. There must be a third storey. From the way the first two spoke of Denver's room, I should think it must be higher than a second storey."

Hamil's torch flashed on as he looked at his watch.

"You have another ten minutes to decide," he said.

Pat made no reply, but hurried forward, turning left where another passage abutted on the one they were traversing. He had not gone far, when his torch picked up the outline of a door or hatch, about four feet high,

with the familiar disc where a handle might be expected. Greatorrex had expressed surprise that there was no outlet upstairs from the secret passages, but he had overlooked this exit.

Warning Hamil not to put his torch on, Pat tried the disc, which turned with little difficulty. A knob was on either side. He pulled and the low door swung open, revealing a dimly lit passage, the walls oak-panelled halfway to the ceiling. Pat put his head through the opening, then crawled through.

"Come on," he whispered.

When Hamil was through, Pat pulled the door to. He observed how snugly it fitted into the panelling, so that its lines were invisible. The handle was one of a line of discs on each panel along the passage.

"This is our line of retreat," Pat said softly. "I won't lock it, but we must mark the position. It's five panels this side of the electric light in the roof."

Hamil was looking round for a quicker way of identifying the door's position. The ceiling and upper half of the walls were whitewashed or distempered and there were no patches to help. He pulled a pencil from his pocket and marked a short, thick, half-inch line above the disc.

"I like to have something sure and safe," he said as he put his pencil away.

"Back, quick, someone coming!" Pat pushed open the panel door and almost bundled Hamil through and followed himself, then gently put the door almost shut and listened. Footsteps sounded on the carpeted passage and passed on, then stopped. Pat opened the door

wider. They heard a key being inserted. Pat thought, "Nobody looks left or right when they're unlocking a door." He took a chance and peeped out. It was the man who had reported about Denver, when Greatorrex had rung first. Pat watched him open a door along the passage, switch on a light in the room and look in. There was a sound of voices. The man's voice was low, his words indistinct, but a shrill treble was clearly audible.

"You might just as well let me go. My father will never pay you anything. I bet he'll have the police along soon. If you let me go now, there'll be time for you to get away before they come, and I'll promise not to say anything."

The voice started so defiantly and gradually tailed off to a wavering treble at the end. Then there was a cry, and the sound of two blows, smack, smack, and a whimpering, which ceased as the door was shut and locked, and Griff hurried back along the passage muttering.

Pat was delighted when he heard the defiance in the small voice. "Beetham should be proud of this kid," was his thought. Then he heard the two blows and the whimper of pain. At that moment he saw red, but had sense enough to wait till the returning steps had passed the door. As soon as they were by, he pulled the door open, bent low as he sprang out, and, on his toes, raced after the man. Griff must have heard or sensed something, for he was turning round as Pat reached him. But it was too late to defend himself. Pat grabbed a handful of hair and jerked back, and kicked Griff's

feet from under him. With a thud Griff landed on his back and the next second Pat was sitting on his chest. With both hands Pat grasped handfuls of hair and banged the unfortunate man's head up and down on the carpet, saying, "Ye murdering swine, ye. Hit a kid that can't defend himself. Then how d'ye like this?" Bang, bang, bang! But, unfortunately for Pat, the carpet was backed by heavy felt, otherwise Griff would have been knocked out. As it was, the moment he had recovered from the shocked surprise of the attack, he started yelling, and fought back.

"Help, help, help!" The last shout for help coincided with a bang on the carpet and made him bite his tongue. This so infuriated him that he suddenly acquired that doubled strength which temper is able to call up. He brought his legs up behind and twined them round Pat's body and began to force him backwards, while his hands gripped Pat's wrists and began to twist them outwards. At the same time, men's voices were heard: "Coming! Where are you? Coming!" They did not seem to be very far away.

It was at this point that Pat realised that he was no match for the adult strength of the man Griff, who was not aware that he had two assailants. Ham was just about to get his arm round Griff's neck and force his head back, to release Pat before the other men arrived. In a flash of inspiration Pat realised that the only hope for Denver and himself was for Hamil to get help.

"Get-help-get-help-get-help," he yelled, praying that Hamil would understand the rigmarole as he ran the words into each other, and that the man on whom he

was sitting, but who was slowly overcoming him, would not realise that there were two intruders, and the second one had gone for help.

Hamil understood at once. Immediately he had heard the reinforcements coming up the stairs, he had realised that he and Pat were no match for the men, and that it would be wiser if he retired and went for help. He banished the thought at once and proceeded to attack Griff, but Pat's cry halted him. He spun round on his heel and darted through the open panel, closing it behind him, as hurrying feet sounded along the passage.

As soon as Pat saw that Hamil was securely on the road for help, he gave himself up to the fight and let his Irish nature have full sway. He was in no position to use Judo, but as long as he retained his grip on Griff's hair, that man was unable to use his superior strength, and the tugs and jerks on what was an excellent head of hair were agonising. Griff muttered as he gripped Pat's wrists and strained at them, but every effort on his part only increased the agony in his scalp, as Pat strained and tugged and jerked. The end came suddenly. Hurrying feet, and a blow on the head that made Pat feel someone had hit him with a brick. It was Baker's fist. Pat went over sideways, his senses reeling. He did not actually pass out, but he was only semi-conscious, when he felt himself jerked to his feet with two men holding him against the wall.

"And who are you, and what are you doing here?" a low, gruff voice penetrated to his dazed mind.

His head felt so heavy, he let it droop with eyes

closed. A stinging smack on one side of his face and a repetition on the other side, made him jerk his head up and open his eyes. Three faces were before him, with three pairs of hostile eyes regarding him.

"Spit it out," the mouth in the middle face snapped.

Even if this frightening situation in which three men, who were almost certainly criminals, were ready to attack him, Pat's Irish humour had to come out. The face was so near, telling him to spit it out. He spat, smack into the face of the man who had spoken. Astonishment was the first expression that spread over the face, followed by black fury, and then a succession of thumps on the nose. Pat was completely defenceless, and those thumps were the most terrible punishment he had ever received. He slid to the floor, his face covered in blood.

Baker took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. "What happened?" he asked Griff.

Griff replied, "I was walkin' along, mindin' my own business, when I 'eard something. Before I could turn, I was on my back with a madman tryin' to pull my 'air out."

"How did he get in?" Baker queried. "Everything's locked up. He's a schoolboy all right, but what's he doing here. Bring him downstairs, anyway. Let's see what His Nibs thinks about it."

Griff and the cook picked up the still unconscious body and followed Baker down to the library.

When Hamil retired into the passage and closed the panel door, he was exceedingly worried and felt that

he should be outside with Pat. But he knew that his present mission was the correct action to take in the circumstances. He crouched with the panel a fraction open so that he could have some idea of Pat's fate. He could hear a scrimmage, and Baker's words, then the two smacks, and finally Baker's instructions to the other two to bring Pat downstairs. He decided that he must hear and see what took place in the room downstairs. He turned the disc which locked the panel and began the return journey. He suddenly felt very much alone and continually had the inclination to turn the torch and look behind. With Scots severity he murmured, "Ye craven, ye're feared of the dark."

He continued and descended the steep stairs to the ground floor. They were so steep that he had to turn, and go down backwards and, while facing the steps as he went down, with the target of the torch limited to the tiny area of step on which his hand rested, he was doubly conscious of the impenetrable darkness, and all that it might be concealing. But he made his way back accurately, and climbed the ramp, and, pushing the slide back, breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the lighted room and the human forms in it. The next second he was filled with consternation at the sight of Pat's body lying motionless on the carpet, his face covered in blood. A slow but deadly anger burned up in him. He did not think that Pat was dead, but he looked as though he was badly injured, and he felt that if he had had a gun, he would have shot down those four men without the slightest compunction.

The first words he heard were from Greatorrex.

"I find it hard to believe that one boy alone could have come here at this time of night. He must have a companion somewhere in that labyrinth of passages."

He quickly opened a drawer of the table, and before Hamil realised what he was about to do, he had taken out a powerful torch and directed its beam at the coat of arms.

"And there he is."

For a second the light dazzled Hamil's eyes. He had a picture of four faces looking up at him and heard expletives and ejaculations. The shock of being discovered caused a horrible sinking feeling in his stomach. Before closing the slide he heard a voice say, "Into the priest's hole quick and we'll catch him."

This sentence seemed to touch off a spring of action inside him. At the moment of discovery his limbs had felt half paralysed by the shock. Now, that inertia was gone and he was moving quickly and calmly. He half ran and half slid down the ramp. He had taken two steps towards the opening to the underground passage, when the thought flashed through his mind that that was what they would expect him to do, and if he should be caught by the terrifying effect of the spirit in the terror chamber and collapse in the passage, they would catch him. At any moment he knew a light would shine out from the door of the priest's hole. The one thing to do was to get upstairs and out through the little panel door and hide in some part of the house until they had all gone to bed. He hurried along the passage and turned to the right, and, as he began the ascent of the steep stairs, the faint reflection of torches

in the first passage was visible in the darkness behind him. He snapped his own torch off and completed the climb in darkness. He heard voices, but he could not distinguish what they were saying, and he felt that it was better to hurry on, in case they decided to search the passages. He was quite sure they would never believe that he had actually gone to ground inside the enemy camp.

In this thought, he was correct. When Greatorex had said, "Into the priest's hole quick, and we'll catch him," he had hurried across to the bookshelves in front of the entrance, swept the books out with one hand, and, lifting the lock, swung the door in and stepped into the hole. He switched his torch on and, turning the disc of the second door, opened it and stepped into the passage, followed by Baker. Griff had gone to fetch another torch, and the cook had been left behind to keep an eye on Pat.

"So that is the entrance we couldn't find," Greatorex said, as his torch immediately picked up the square opening in the floor of the passage, and the steps down. "You take the torch and go after him, Baker. You should soon catch him."

"I guess I'd want company down there. You come too."

Griff arrived with a second torch. "'Oo's afraid of the big bad spook. Come on, Bako," he said, and hurried down the steps. Baker followed and the two men ran along with bowed heads, their torches lighting up the passage. They soon felt the fear.

Baker said, "Say, Griff, I got a feeling someone's waiting for us. Watch out for him."

"I got a feelin' the roof's comin' down any minute," Griff replied. He had slowed down and was walking very warily. "'Ere, I don't like it. There's somethin' down 'ere don't like us and don't want us, an' it's somethin' very nasty."

"You're tellin' me, brother. And I don't think it's flesh and blood. If it was I'd go right ahead. I don't frighten easy, but I guess this is one time when I do."

"Same 'ere, Bako. No kid ever went this way. 'E'd never've made it. There's somethin' 'round the corner's worse'n twenty devils. I'm goin' back."

"That's O.K. with me." They turned and Baker led the way back. Immediately their nervous fears vanished. Griff said, "The kid in the library's seen the lot of us. We'll have to put his light out."

"What about this second kid? 'E's seen the lot of us, too. If we don't catch 'im, we're for it. And if we do catch 'im, that's a second stiff we got round our necks. But if we turn 'is Nibs in to the police, we save our necks and pick up ten thousand. What d'yer say?"

"I'm with you all the way. I guess that's what we do."

They had arrived at the foot of the steps as Baker made this remark. Greatorrex was standing at the top. He had heard the conversation echoing along the stone walls of the passage, but he showed no sign.

"I see you didn't catch him. How far did you go? You appear to have returned very quickly."

"No quicker than you'd have come back yourself, if you'd struck what we struck," Baker replied. "That boy never went that way. There's something there waiting for you. Something that takes the guts out of you before you get near it."

"What are you talking about? Have you been suffering from claustrophobia?"

Griff replied, "Whatever that is, we've both been bitten by the same bug. I wouldn't go back there again for money. Look, Guv'nor, take a torch and go along that tunnel. If you don't feel it, you must be built different from the rest of us."

Knowing their intentions, Greatorex suspected some plot against himself. He decided to take one of them as a hostage.

He said, "Very well, I will go, but one of you must come with me. Baker, you stay here and guard this exit. Give me your torch, Griff. I will go first."

"All right, I don't mind coming if you go first."

Baker came up and Greatorex went down and took Griff's torch and set out along the passage. The apprehension soon made itself felt, until the two were forcing themselves along against a current of fear. Griff was the first to cry out.

"Stop, Guv'nor. I can't go no further."

Greatorex stopped. "This is extraordinary. If we were in Africa I could understand it, but not here. Somebody has laid a curse on this place."

Griff broke in. "Let's get out, Guv'nor, quick. I can't stand this. The thing'll be coming along the passage any minute."

"You return if you want to. I must discover the cause of this. It is pure witchcraft. Evil unadulterated."

Griff appeared to be panic-stricken. He fell on his knees and flung his arms round Greatorex as though going into a rugger tackle. He gabbled, "Don't leave

leave me, don't leave me!" Greatorrex was amused at the lack of spirit of this man who was going to hand him, Greatorrex, over to the police. 'Scum,' he thought. Then an idea occurred to him. Should he choke him and leave him in the passage? Then he could return and deal with Baker similarly, and after that with the third member, 'Cookie.' In this way he could deal with each single-handed and unknown to the others. He had no intention of leaving for London in the morning, but if he killed the three now, he might not be able to catch the schoolboy who was obviously loose in the passages. No, until they had caught the schoolboy, the three men should live in order to be of service, otherwise the boy might escape and get word to the police, which would upset his plans.

He bent down and laid the torch on the ground, pulled apart the two clinging arms from his legs, held them wide and kicked Griff in the chest, released the arms, picked up the torch and went forward. His strength and the swiftness of his movements would have filled Pat with envy. He walked steadfastly on despite the paralysing drag on his limbs. He knew, what investigators had proved, that there is a definite limit to the power of evil, a point at which it breaks down before human willpower. Knowing this, he struggled on against the evil influence, and suddenly it disappeared, dropping from him as a cloak might have dropped from his shoulders. Smiling in gratification at his victory, he strode on and reached the chamber. As soon as the light from his torch revealed the stake in the middle, he knew the whole story. He crossed to the

opposite passage and followed it to the hole in the wood. He climbed out just as the lights of a car passed along the road beyond the hedge. He realised that this must be the road to Werley. "Very interesting," he murmured as he jumped down into the hole again and climbed into the passage. He had always been interested in witchcraft, voodooism and similar cults of evil, and had read extensively on the subject. He knew that once human willpower had overcome any particular source of evil, the victory was final. He continued down the passage unmolested by any apprehension or other terrifying emotion.

There was no sign of Griff in the passage. When Greatorex arrived back at the steps up into the house, Griff and Baker were talking at the top.

"So you managed to get back, Griff."

"Yes, I did, and no thanks to you, Guv'nor. 'Ow you kept on beats me. What was it? Did yer find it? I don' know 'ow you did it. You must be built different from us."

"I have a human frame, just like you, but I have very much more willpower. What you felt was the evil of ancient witchcraft, and the only weapon to beat that is willpower."

"I guess you've got something there, Boss," Baker said. "But you're not telling me that them kids have got more willpower than me and Griff. Either they didn't go that way, or there's some trick about it that we don't know. They must have a charm or something that gets them by."

Greatorex said nothing to Baker and Griff. If they

were satisfied that the terror could be easily conquered they might try to escape, if they discovered that he intended to kill them. But he realised that the two boys who had come that night must have some way of combating the evil, and what had enabled them to get in, could enable them to get out, so it was possible that the boy they were after had gone back through the passage. On the other hand, Greatorrex thought, it was more likely that he would stay behind to try and help his friend. In any case, some useful information would be obtained from the boy in the library. If he refused to speak, there were various ways of persuading him.

"I think the boy is still in the house passages. You stay by this exit, Griff, and see that he doesn't get out. Baker, you come with me, and we will see if we cannot twist some useful information out of the boy in the library, then we will deal with the other one."

"How d'you reckon you're going to deal with these two, Boss?" Baker enquired. "They've seen the lot of us. We cant' let 'em go."

"No, Baker. We shall not let them go. Their parents will never see them again, at least, not alive. We will put them in the car and run it over the cliffs. Then we will report to the police that someone has stolen the car. That will deal with their case. Come, Baker."

Baker followed Greatorrex through the priest's hole and into the library, where they stood looking round a room that contained neither Cookie nor the youth he had been guarding.



· CHAPTER EIGHT

The Tables Turned

WHEN Hamil arrived back at the panel in the upstairs passage, his mind was full of the idea of rescuing Pat. He thought it probable that at least three of the men would be out of the library, quite possibly all. But if one man were in the library, some form of weapon would be necessary to tackle him and get Pat out before the others returned. With this end in view, he determined to search the bedrooms off the passage. He opened the panel and crept out. On a sudden thought, he hurried along to the room containing Denver and tapped on the door.

"Denver, Denver," he called softly. "This is Hamil of Beetham. O'Rory and I have managed to get in here.

We're going to the police when we get out. We hope to have you out by the morning. Don't say anything about it. Keep your chin up. Cheerio."

"Thank you so much, Hamil. That's wonderful news. Cheerio," came the reply.

Hamil retraced his steps in the direction from which the men had come. He opened a door on his right, closed it and switched on the light. It was a bedroom with heavy old-fashioned furniture, obviously occupied, some clothes draped over a chair, the dressing-table littered with objects, including two or three bottles. He thought one of these might make a weapon, but was disappointed. There was a nearly-empty bottle of whisky, an unopened half-bottle of brandy and a large bottle of colourless liquid. He pulled out the cork and sniffed...chloroform... This must be Griff's room. He thought the brandy might be useful for Pat, and put the bottle into his raincoat pocket. But he must have a weapon. He opened the top drawer of a chest of drawers and found the ideal thing, a revolver. He snapped it open. It was loaded. He ejected the bullets into the drawer, pocketed the weapon, and hurried to the door. Now he was ready for battle.

Feeling elated he switched out the light and continued along the passage. At the end, he found himself in a gallery that ran round the great hall. From the end opposite the front door, a wide staircase descended to the hall. He moved round to this and was about to step down when a door opened. Instantly he flung himself to the ground. Footsteps crossed the hall, and he was in time to hear a door shut. Tiptoeing downstairs he

listened at the door, but could hear nothing. Quietly he turned the handle and prayed that the door would not squeak as he gently pushed it open. The man in the room was standing with his back to the door. He was nudging Pat with his boot.

"Come on, sit up," he said roughly. He gave Pat a kick in the ribs. "Get up, d'ye hear me?"

It was at this moment that Hamil swung the revolver up and brought the butt down on the crown of Cookie's head. The man half-turned, and Hamil stepped back, with the gun raised for another blow, but this was not required. Quietly Cookie fell to the floor and lay motionless. Hamil stepped over him and bent down,

"Pat, Pat, are ye badly hurt?"

Pat opened his eyes and closed them again. "Ooh, I've got a head like the drums of Kilkenny. Where are we, Ham?"

"We're in the library. They knocked you out and brought you down here. You'll have to get up. I've got some brandy here. Drink it, it'll do you good. We haven't much time."

He helped Pat to sit up and produced the bottle. Pat put it to his mouth and drank. As the fiery liquid went down he made a face and thrust the bottle at Ham, who took it and was replacing the cork, when Pat reached for the bottle again. "It's doing me a power of good," he said, and took another drink. This time, after returning the bottle, he began to look round the room. "Where are they?"

"In the passage looking for me," Ham replied

urgently. "Can you get up, Pat? We've got to get out of here. They'll be back any moment. See if you can stand."

Pat got to his feet with a little assistance. He closed his eyes and wiggled his nose once or twice.

"I seem to have had an awful walloping," he murmured; "my face is all stiff."

"Your face is covered in blood. Come on, man, we've got to get out of it."

Pat said, "Give me another suck at that bottle and I'll be all right. No wonder it's called *eau-de-vie*, water of life. I should say it was."

Hamil handed him the bottle. "Take your drink and let's be going. Pat, you're mad to dawdle like this. If they come back we're finished. You've had a taste already of what they can do."

Pat handed back the bottle. The spirit had revived him beyond belief.

"Fair enough, Ham, my boy. I'm feeling fine now. We'll get along...Mother of Mercy, what's this?"

He was looking down at Cookie.

"Didn't you see me lay him out? Come on, Pat, never mind him."

"But of course we mind him. He's our hostage. We take him with us. You take his shoulders. I'll take his legs. Quick now. You say we have no time to waste."

Hamil knew it was useless to argue. He got his hands under Cookie's armpits and Pat took a leg under each arm. They staggered out through the door.

"Which way?" Pat queried.

"Up the stairs. Keep level with me, sideways, or we'll never make it."

They struggled up the stairs, one step at a time.

"Now right, and along the passage," Hamil directed.

Just inside the passage Pat said, "I've got to drop him or my head'll burst." He released the legs and Hamil eased the body to the ground.

Pat leaned his head on his arm against the wall. "It's my nose and eyes. I'll be all right in a minute."

"We'll get to a bedroom, then you can wash your face and you'll feel better," Hamil said. "Stay there and I will see what bedrooms are along this passage."

He ran along the passage, past Griff's room, then Denver's and he tried the door beyond. This was a bedroom furnished in modern fashion, with two single beds, which were not made up. Hamil closed the door and hurried back.

"There is an empty room here. We'll go there. Are you feeling any better?"

"That I am. When I've had a wash, I'll be all right."

They picked up the still unconscious figure and carried him to the bedroom, where they laid him on one of the beds. Hamil went across to a basin and turned on the hot tap, although he had no expectation that there would be hot water. He was pleasantly surprised when it came.

"Here you are, Pat. Hot water and all. Now freshen yourself up. We must get out and phone the police. It's just struck me that the entrance must have been in that big hall, and we could have walked out through the front door. We must be losing our senses, bothering with hostages."

Pat said nothing. He came over to the basin and

rinsed his face. Hamil had gone to the open door and was standing there listening. He felt there had been plenty of time for the men to investigate the passage. He found it difficult to decide what they could be doing, unless, having drawn a blank they were now searching the house passages. A movement from the bed attracted his attention. At once, the problem of what they were to do with their hostage filled his thoughts. Then an idea flashed up. He ran along the passage to Griff's room. A minute later he returned with a bottle.

He said, "I have chloroform here. We will put out the hostage."

"Glory be, Ham. What a brainwave," Pat said, drying his hands on a towel. He folded one end of the towel into a pad. "Here we are. Pour out some sleep medicine."

Hamil poured chloroform on to the improvised pad, just as a groan came from the bed, and a voice.

"Ooh, what hit me? Is that you, Griff?"

"No, this is your old pal, O'Rory," Pat said. He whispered to Hamil, "Go the other side and hold him down."

They approached the bed, one each side, and the man raised himself on an elbow. Frowningly, he considered them. He was still a trifle bewildered.

"What is this?" he muttered.

"Something to take the pain away," Pat said, and slammed the pad over the man's mouth with such force that he fell back on the mattress. "Hold him down, Ham."

The pad was in Pat's left hand, being held firmly over the mouth. His right hand was holding Cookie's nose. Hamil had jumped on to the bed and was sitting astride the cook, holding his arms down. The fellow was not sufficiently recovered to put up much of a struggle. With Pat securely holding his nose, he was forced to breathe in the fumes of chloroform, which soon began to take effect. After a few minutes Cookie was lying limp and motionless on the bed.

"I wonder how much is enough to keep him quiet for an hour or so," Pat queried.

Hamil said, "I think it would be unwise to give him any more. All we have to do is to get out."

"I suppose you're right, Ham, but I hate to leave now we've taken him. Wouldn't it be fine if we could take the lot of them?"

"Pat, you're out of your senses. They've smashed your face up, we know they think nothing of murder, and you talk as though it was some game. Come on. If you don't come with me, I shall go alone."

"All right. I'm coming, but I'd dearly like to stay and continue the fight."

"Well, I would rather get home and down to my bed, after we've told the police."

Hamil opened the door and listened. He said, "I think the best plan is to go down through the panel in this passage. If they are not guarding the steps we can get away, and if we go down quietly without using our torches, we can see if they are at the steps, and if they are, we must try the front door. Someone is coming," he added, and gently closed the door.

"We'll get out as soon as they've gone," Pat said. He went across to the bed. "I'm taking this towel with the chloroform on, in case the police want proof."

At that moment, the door was pushed violently open, nearly knocking Hamil backwards, but he recovered and stood quite still, while Baker saw Pat and advanced towards him.

"So it's you again. Last time wasn't enough, eh? We want you for question——"

Hamil had crept up and smashed the revolver down on Baker's head. Baker staggered, but did not collapse as Cookie had done. He turned to face his attacker and Hamil tossed the revolver over to Pat, who caught it and, as Baker came to grips with Hamil, laid the man out cold.

"It's lucky there are two beds," Pat said, as they picked Baker up and carried him to the second bed. "Where we'll put the others, I don't know."

Hamil shook his head and sighed. He knew that he was the sensible member of the partnership, but Fate always seemed to favour Pat's mad schemes. He poured chloroform on to the towel pad and Pat held it over Baker's mouth, carrying out the same procedure that had put Cookie off.

After a few minutes he lifted the pad. "I wonder if I should have waited till he came to."

"It's a bit late to wonder that now," Hamil replied. "If he dies, you'll know next time that it is unwise to give chloroform while the patient is unconscious. Now let's go."

Pat looked up in amazement. "Sure, you can't mean

that, Ham. When we've captured half the enemy forces, and you want to retire."

"Pat, we are schoolboys, not generals in charge of armies. We did not capture them. Fate threw them into our arms."

"Of course it did. It's usually Fate that wins wars for generals. We have only to take one more and the fourth will be at our mercy. We can take the key off him and take Denver along home."

Hamil shook his head. "I never met anybody who could build castles on such poor foundations. Be your age for goodness sake. We came here to find Denver so that we could inform the police, not to take on four dangerous criminals single-handed."

Pat took three steps and grasped his friend's arm.

"Ham, my beamish boy," he exclaimed, "of course we must be going. Come on. In twenty minutes we'll be out in the road and on our way."

"I am glad you have come to your senses," Hamil replied as he followed Pat down the passage. They stopped at Hamil's pencil mark and went through the door. Pat closed it and locked it behind them and followed Hamil. When they arrived at the top of the steep steps Hamil warned Pat,

"You must go down backwards, and you must not use your torch, as a reflection can show in the passage. When we get to the bottom, you wait while I go and see if anyone is guarding the exit. If it is all clear, I will flash my torch and you can come on."

Hamil went down. Pat followed and felt, as Hamil had done the first time, that going through the

darkness was like wading through black treacle. While he stood waiting at the foot of the steps he felt he was breathing in this heavy black stuff and it was clouding his mind and thoughts. He had the idea that if he took his hand from the steps, he would be unable to find them again. He began to imagine himself imprisoned for ever in this awful dark. He thought it would be easy to panic, if you did not know that you had your torch which could kill the darkness in an instant. He felt for his torch in his raincoat pocket. The feel of it reminded him of the heavy object in the other pocket, the revolver that Hamil had tossed to him.

It was while he was standing with these unpleasant thoughts that suddenly a strange voice came through the darkness.

“Got yer!” the voice hissed.

One of Pat's qualities was the way his body would flash into action at a moment's notice. He was moving while the words still seemed to be hanging in the air. He held the torch low and shaded it with his other hand. As he came up to the passage leading to the exit, he switched off the torch and looked round the corner. He could hear a scuffling. He switched on his torch, gripped the revolver by the barrel with his right hand and sprinted down the passage. The man Griff was holding Hamil in a tight embrace and dragging him towards the open door of the priest's hole. His face showed white in the light of the torch, which was dazzling him so that he could see nothing, but he had the sense to swing Hamil round between himself and his new attacker. He was too late, however. Pat brought

the butt of the revolver down on his head with a soft thud. All expression faded from Griff's face, and he sank to the floor and rolled over. Hamil extricated himself from the fallen figure and stood up.

"Thanks, Pat," he said. "I wouldn't shout because I did not want him to know you were there. He must have been waiting in the other passage and heard me come in. He took me from behind. I could not free my arms, but oh, I was glad when I saw the flash of your torch. What made you come?"

"I heard him say, 'Got yer.' "

"Of course. Come on. Let's go now."

A groan came out of the darkness. Pat flashed his torch down and saw Griff struggling to a sitting position.

"By the saints, he's come to. What do we do now? I can't lay him out in cold blood."

"Why not? You must, Pat."

"No," Pat replied. "I have a better idea. Shine your torch on me."

Hamil obliged. Pat stood over Griff, pointing the revolver at him. He bent down and said softly,

"I give you a choice. Come upstairs and be shut in a room, or take another biff on the head. I'd shoot you, only I don't want to make a noise."

Griff looked up defiantly. "Sez you. You couldn't shoot a sparrow, schoolboy."

Pat's expression was grim. He whispered to Ham, "Shut the door of the hole and they won't hear a thing."

He suddenly spun the revolver on one finger, his

open hand closing on it as it came round. The action startled Griff. That spin had been expert and he knew it. He cast a perplexed glance at the set face of this schoolboy. When he saw the thumb adroitly pulling back the hammer, cowboy fashion, he became worried.

"Are you coming upstairs? Answer quick. I'm Irish incidentally, I.R.A., and I've no time to waste on things like you," Pat said sharply.

Griff decided. "All right. I'll go," he said and slowly got to his feet.

"Get going. Down the passage and turn right," Pat said crisply. "Any monkey business and you'll never leave this passage."

Griff moved forward. He was still wondering if he was being bluffed. Then he recollected the calm way this boy had spat in Baker's face regardless of consequences and when he was completely at their mercy. No, he decided, a boy who could do that would be quite capable of shooting a man and claiming self-defence. It was not worth chancing. Up the steep stairs, along the top passage to the panel door. Hamil opened the panel and, on Pat's orders, climbed through.

"Now you get through," Pat ordered. Griff climbed through, still wondering what the game was and if he dared to take a chance. His head was sore from the blow, but although it had put him out for a few moments, the walk up the passages had given him plenty of time to recover. He was still puzzling over that expert gun spin, and knew nothing of the hours Pat had spent every day, all one holidays, perfecting that action, which had been shown him by an ex-cowboy at a circus.

Pat was through the aperture quickly. He poked the gun into Griff's back and told him to move. Hamil opened the door of the room. They were all so busy that no one saw a dark head poking out of the panel aperture and watching them.

Once inside the bedroom, Hamil closed the door. Pat indicated with a nod the towel and chloroform bottle. While Hamil was preparing this, Griff was told to stand facing the wall. The sight of Baker and Cookie lying prone on the two beds, was very disturbing to Griff. But it confirmed his wisdom in not trying anything. Obviously, these two boys were something very much more than they appeared to be. He began to wonder what his own fate was going to be. He was not left long in doubt.

"Turn round," Pat ordered.

As Griff turned, Pat dropped the gun. Snatching the man's left wrist, he put a lock on the arm that prevented any serious resistance. From behind, Hamil held the saturated towel over Griff's mouth and nose. With a knee in the unfortunate man's back, Hamil was able to keep the towel in position despite the clawing of Griff's right hand to dislodge it, and the jerking of the head from side to side. Griff was unable to move his body owing to the agonising pain in his left arm when Pat put the pressure on. Gradually the struggles eased as the fumes dulled Griff's senses, the knees gave way. Pat released the lock.

"Keep the pad there a little longer," he said. "We'll put him between the beds."

"Why should we do that?" Hamil asked. "Let him lie here. What is the difference?"

"Och, sure. How silly. Why not indeed?" Suddenly Pat gasped. "Ham, this is the one that has the key. We'll get Denver and take him back with us. Even if we meet Greatorrex, a sight of the gun will keep him quiet. And we'll go out the front way. Then Denver need never know about the secret entrance."

Pat went through Griff's pockets and soon found the key.

"Boy, oh boy!" he exclaimed in delight. "Ten thousand pounds. Can you beat it?"

Hamil stood up and dropped the towel. "I must say, it appears to be the most likely dream of yours yet. But I still think it is too early——"

He stopped at the sound of a sharp click from the door.

"What was that?" Pat exclaimed.

He ran to the door and stood with the gun in his right hand. Then he turned the handle, but, although he tried again and again, the heavy, very solid door was securely locked.

"By the saints, he's done it on us," Pat gasped. "That must have been Greatorrex. But he doesn't know he's locked his own men in too. We'll get out by the window, then we can deal with him. Wait, I'll see if the next-door key will fit."

He tried the key he had taken from Griff's pocket.

"Ah, no. He's left the key in the other side. I can't get this one in. What's the drop from the window?"

Hamil had gone to the window and opened it.

"There is nothing doing from this window. Take a look yourself."

Incredulously, Pat hurried across and shone his torch down from the window. The height to the ground was at least fifteen feet. This would not have deterred either of them from dropping to the ground, if there had been ground to land on. But, from the foot of the wall, a wide rockery sloped steeply down to a sunken garden.

"You're right, Ham. 'Twould be madness to try that. You'd have to be luckier even than I am, not to break a leg or an ankle. Oh, this is the limit. Victory in our hands and we're locked in." He surveyed the room. A motionless figure on each bed, and a third on the floor.

"Sure it looks like a bedroom in a cheap doss-house," he muttered as his eyes scanned every corner, searching for something that could be used as a means of descent to the ground. Hamil was also looking round with the same object in view.

He said, "If the curtains came to the ground, they would be long enough, perhaps, but these are too short and I do not think this soft material would be strong enough."

"I have it," Pat exclaimed. "What we want is on the beds."

"What do you mean?" Ham demanded. "There are no bedclothes."

"Clothes, my boy, clothes, not bedclothes. Strip the bodies, come on," Pat cried gleefully. "Three pairs of trousers, six feet; three shirts, six feet; that's twelve feet, and you can drop the rest."

"I think that is the answer, Pat. But it is not a job I like doing," Hamil replied. He began undoing the

buttons of Cookie's coat. Pat was already undoing the belt of Baker's trousers.

They removed Cookie's trousers and then Griff's. The shirts were even more difficult. When they had finished, the bodies were lying in curiously abandoned positions.

Hamil said, "This is horrible, Pat. It's like some nightmare. How are you going to tie these things up?"

"I'll show you. We make a chain with links."

They worked rapidly and very soon the 'weird chain was completed.

"Now," Pat said, "pull up the bed with Baker on."

They dragged this to the window, and Hamil lifted the end while Pat slipped one loop of the chain under one of the legs. Hamil lowered the bed and Pat threw the 'chain' out of the window. He leaned out and flashed his torch down to see how far it reached.

"It's enough, Ham. We can do it. I'm heavier than you. I'll go down first, and if it holds me, 'twill hold you."

"And supposing it breaks," Hamil queried. "You will be down there with a broken leg, and I shall be up here when Greatorex comes back, or these chaps come out of their trance and wonder where their clothes' are. And after seeing what they did to you, I do not feel like being at their mercy."

Pat gave in at once. "Sure your good Scots common sense saves the day every time. Down you go, Ham, and good luck. In five minutes we'll be clear."

"I'll take the towel in case one of us has a fall. It might help as a sling or bandage," Hamil said and went

across to where Griff was lying, with the towel on the floor beside him.

As he was picking up the towel, the door opened and Greatorex came in carrying an automatic pistol. One glance at the bed and the "clothes chain" out of the window, coupled with the smell of chloroform and the three figures asprawl in their underclothes, told him everything.

"Put your hands up and don't move," he snarled.

Still holding the towel in his hand, Hamil was gazing at the pistol, a little surprised that he was not more frightened at this dramatic turn of events. Then two things happened at once. There was a scrambling movement from the window, and the pistol in Greatorex's hand spat fire with a report like a smack. Greatorex sprang towards the window. Hamil instinctively whisked the towel at Greatorex's head. It landed on his face and blinded him for a second as he halted and snatched it away. And that second was enough for Pat to complete the movement he had started when the gun went off and a red-hot iron seemed to shear the side of his head. At the moment of impact he was aware of the stab of agony, but one leg was already over the sill and, despite the shock of the wound, the other was over and he was sliding down the clothes chain by the time Greatorex reached the window. Greatorex had no torch. After the lighted room, he could make out nothing in the garden below. Pat was in the same condition visually and he dared not put his torch on. Greatorex leaped across the room and pushed the pistol into Hamil's stomach.

"You have a torch. Where is it?"

Hamil produced it, with an unpleasant sinking feeling in his stomach until the pistol was removed. Running to the window, Greatorrex switched on the torch, and the steeply sloping rockery in which Pat was stumbling became a circle of light. Immediately Pat could see to move, he became nimble, too nimble, or else the smack of a report and the whiz of a bullet past his ear upset his equilibrium. Whichever it was, he slipped, and although his hands broke the fall, he bumped and rolled and jarred painfully against hard, rocky substances before he lay flat on the lawn feeling that half the bones in his body were broken.

He was about to struggle to a sitting position, when he realised that the torch was still shining on him from that upper window. He lay quite still, thinking. In the excitement of action, the risk he had run had not entered his mind, but now it was forcibly impressed upon him that he could easily have been lying there dead. Those shots had been fired in deadly earnest. Any fears he might have had for himself were drowned in the thought of what might be happening to Hamil alone in that room with a madman, for that was how he now thought of Greatorrex.

When the light from the torch went out and he was lying in darkness, he would have got to his feet in response to the urgent demand for some action to help Hamil, but a cautionary instinct warned him to lie still a little longer. He was glad he had done so when the torch flashed on again some ten seconds later, and found him lying motionless as before.

Up in the room, after the second flash of the torch had found Pat presumably dead, Greatorrex turned and said,

"That is one meddler the less. I will——"

There was no sign of Hamil. Greatorrex crossed the room quickly. For a big man his movements were exceptionally swift and easy. He ran down the passage. The panel door was open, but he was not deceived. On to the balcony round the hall and down the broad stairs, whose thick carpet rendered his descent silent. Hamil was at the front door. He had unlocked it but had not realised there were bolts, top and bottom. He had just slipped the bottom bolt and was pulling the door open, when Greatorrex grabbed him. He spun him round facing the stairway, and poked the pistol into his back.

"You will be joining your friend outside soon, but at my discretion, not yours. Get moving."

Hamil went up the stairs worried and, he freely admitted, somewhat frightened. He was worried about Pat. At that first shot he had seen the immediate streak of red along the side of Pat's head. It was quite clear that Greatorrex had shot to kill, but Pat had slid down the rope apparently unaffected by the wound. What had happened after that Hamil had no idea, as he had darted through the door as soon as Greatorrex had moved to look out of the window, but he had heard that second shot, and that was what worried him. Greatorrex's words, still echoing in his mind, had a double meaning. Did they mean that he was going to be released shortly to join Pat, who had got away, or

did they mean that Pat was dead and soon his friend would join him. He was frightened at the imminence of death. It seemed so impossible, such nonsense; a few hours ago he had been secure, between the safe walls of Beetham, a schoolboy with his hopes and ambitions of life before him, and now he was being driven along at the point of a revolver by a man who obviously thought nothing of murdering people. His thoughts were interrupted by a remark from behind, as they passed the open panel door.

"Did you imagine that I should be deceived by that open panel, when I was in possession of your torch?"

"It was a chance worth taking," Hamil replied. "If it had only stopped you for five seconds, I should have been away."

They turned into the room and Greatorex shut the door.

"And where would you have gone when you got away? What were you doing here, in any case?"

"We were only here for a lark." Hamil endeavoured to bluff. "We had found the secret passage by accident and thought it would be fun to explore it at night."

A sardonic laugh was the reply.

"That is as maybe, but what you have learned here has signed your death warrant. Do you know why?"

"Why?" Hamil demanded.

"Because you have dared to interfere with my plans, that is why. Go over to the window."

Hamil moved over to the window, wondering what the next move was going to be.

"Lift that bed and drop those clothes out of the window."

Instantaneously, Hamil saw his way out. He bent down, as though to lift the bed, grasped the legs with both hands and swung his legs out of the window, as though he were vaulting the horse in the gymnasium. The moment his legs cleared the sill, he let go of the bed and, as his body dropped, caught the sill with both hands preparatory to sliding down the chain. It was a lightning movement, brilliantly conceived and executed, but Greatorrex was equally smart and rapid. He dropped the gun and the torch and caught Hamil's wrists before he could slide down the clothes chain. Hamil jerked and tugged, even risking the dangerous fall if he got free and failed to grab the chain. But Greatorrex placed a knee on the window sill and dragged him back into the room. He was shocked at the man's strength.

The next moment he was stunned by a blow on the side of the head that sent him flying into a corner. Before he could pick himself up, Greatorrex was on him again. The big man seemed to have gone mad. Hamil found himself being picked up and shaken till his eyes were seeing double and he was wondering if his neck was dislocated. Then he received another stunning blow, this time between the eyes. The world seemed to be going round and round as he collapsed to the floor. Vaguely he was aware of movement in the room, then an exclamation, and a door banged.

What had happened was that Greatorrex, having vented his feelings on Hamil, lifted the bed and dropped the clothes chain out of the window. Then he picked up the torch and pistol, and flashed the torch

out of the window to confirm that Pat was still where he had fallen.

The garden was empty. However, it was not likely that Pat could have got very far, for he must have been feeling very shaken by his fall. Greatorrex knew that if he hurried he could catch him on the drive, as that was the only way out of the grounds; no one would try to get out through the woods at night. He hurried out of the room, locking the door after him.





CHAPTER NINE

Greatorex is Ruthless

AFTER the second flash of the torch, Pat felt he was safe. He struggled to his feet. It was a most painful operation, but he was pleased to find that no bones were broken. His first thought was for Hamil. He wished the pistol were loaded so that he could meet Greatorex on equal terms. He knew that Hamil had ejected the cartridges into a drawer in Griff's room, and he decided that he would get to that drawer and load the weapon. With this object in view, he walked to the side of the sunken garden and climbed up a grass bank. He came to a gate and went through on to green lawns. In the darkness he could see that he had rounded the side of the Grange, and the crunch of crisp

gravel told him that he was on the drive. His eyes were now accustomed to the dark, and walking along he found himself at a porch which was evidently the front entrance.

He crept round and saw through narrow windows each side of the massive front door that lights were on in the hall. He decided to have a look through one of these windows, but the big door swung open, and he darted back behind the side of the porch. Someone hurried out and began running down the drive. Pat looked round and was sure that the running form was Greatorrex.

"Here's luck," he murmured, as he hurried into the hall.

He was making for the main stairs, when an idea occurred to him; he would telephone the police from the library, where he had observed there was a telephone. That would solve all their problems. He entered the library. The telephone was on a writing-desk near the centre of the room. He picked up the instrument and, as a precaution, sat on the floor with his knees bent, partially concealed by the desk. When the exchange answered, he said,

"I want the Central Police Station, Salisbury. The boy who was kidnapped is at the Grange, Werley. Put me through quickly. It's terribly urgent."

A man's voice answered, "I'll put you through. I hope you're not pulling their leg. They're getting a bit tired of folk ringing up saying they know where the boy is."

"Well, I know he is here. I heard him talking to

one of the men that's holding him. He told him his father would never pay up. But hurry, please, put me through to the police. I may be caught here at any moment."

Almost immediately a voice answered, "Central Police Station, Salisbury."

"Is that the police, the boy——"

The instrument was snatched away and the receiver clapped back into place.

"You dare to ring the police."

Greatorex replaced the telephone on the desk, and reached down and dragged Pat to his feet. Without another word, he hit him a scientific upper cut that nearly lifted him off his feet. Pat was 'out' before he hit the floor. Greatorex left the room and returned in a few minutes with a considerable coil of thin line. Pat was still lying where he had left him. That wicked upper cut, on top of all the other injuries he had received that night, was more than the system could stand. Greatorex bound his wrists behind his back, then his ankles, and he fastened the wrists and ankles together with a short piece of line pulled tight. He picked up Pat as though he had been a child and carried him across to the door of the priest's hole, which was still open. The door into the secret passage was also open. After dumping the unconscious boy on the floor of the passage, Greatorex closed this door and returned to the library, where he also shut the book-shelf door.

"Miserable meddler," he muttered. "The police can trace that call if they try. They may come along. I must put the others out of the way."

He made his way up the stairs to the room containing Hamil and the three men. He unlocked the door. Hamil was sitting on one of the beds, looking very dejected. He had what would soon be two black eyes from the final blow he had received. Griff had come round from the chloroform. He was lying on the floor with his eyes wide open. Greatorex went over to him.

"Turn over," he ordered.

"What for?" Griff demanded.

"Because I tell you to," Greatorex hissed through clenched teeth, as he dropped the coil of line and, grasping Griff's nearest arm, gave it a twist that forced him to turn over on to his stomach. Greatorex twisted the arm till Griff was gasping in agony, then he knelt on the arm in the middle of Griff's back, secured the other and proceeded to lash the wrists together. Hamil watched the neat operation. He was in a dilemma. Even if he attempted to interfere, he knew what the result of the encounter would be, for he was still suffering from the original bout, but to sit still and watch a sick man being lashed up in this painful manner revolted all his sense of decency and fair play. Then he remembered that he was not moving in a world where decency and fair play were matters of any moment. Greatorex lashed Griff's feet to his bound hands in similar fashion to the way Pat had been trussed up. Now that he was no longer suffering from a twisted arm, Griff was swearing and cursing and suddenly he began calling to Baker and Cookie to wake up and come to his aid. Greatorex soon dealt with this. He picked up the chloroform towel, placed it over Griff's mouth and tied it tightly round his head.

"Now your turn," he said. "Stand up and put your hands behind you."

Seeing budding resistance in Hamil's attitude, he continued, "You know what will happen if I set about you, I shall break every bone in your body, and you will still be tied up. Put your hands behind you."

Although Hamil's valiant Scots nature rebelled against such submission, he realised the futility of resistance and obeyed the order. In a few minutes he was trussed as securely and uncomfortably as Griff, and in a very short time Baker and Cookie had been similarly treated. The movement and rough handling had brought both of them out of their chloroform coma. Baker was the first to speak.

"What's the game?" Twisting his head round, he saw Greatorex. "Hey, Guv'nor, these boys have doped us and tied us up. Get these lashings off, will yer, my back's all in a kink."

"It will be in a permanent kink before those lashings come off," Greatorex replied, as he went out of the room.

"Hey, Griff, Cookie, what's the game? D'you know anything about it?"

Baker was lying on his stomach with his hands and feet lashed behind him. He managed to wriggle and twist his head round so that he obtained a view of the others, all tied up in a similar plight, and Griff securely gagged.

Cookie replied, "All I know is, I gave a boy a boot in the ribs, and the ceiling came down on me or something. I don't know who did this on me, but I don't like it."

"What about you, kid. Who tied you up?" Baker asked.

"Greateorex," Hamil replied miserably.

"Why?"

"He said that what I had learned here had signed my death warrant."

Cookie chipped in, "That's what I been tellin' you, Bako, all along. He's mad. We're in a bad spot."

"Not us, Cookie. It's only the kid. He was asking for it when he came here. We're all right."

"Are we? Then what are we tied up for?"

Before Baker could formulate an answer, the door opened and Greateorex returned with three towels.

"What's the game, Guv'nor? Undo these lashings.

What's the game?" Baker repeated.

"No game," Greateorex replied, as he securely gagged Cookie with one of the towels. "Real life drama. Instead of you handing me over to the police, I am going to put you where the police will never find you."

"Look, Guv'nor," Baker replied urgently. "I admit we talked out of turn. But take these lashings off and we'll stay here as long as you like. The kids are different. They'd give us all away. They got to go. They

His last remark ended in gurgles and mumbles as Greateorex wrapped the roll of towel round his mouth and knotted it tightly at the back of his neck. If looks could have killed, there was certainly murder in Baker's eyes.

Hamil said, as Greateorex approached him, "What has happened to Pat, the boy who was with me?"

Greatorex proceeded to gag Hamil as he said, "He got through to the police, but I caught him before he could tell them anything. However, in case the police trace the call and pay me a visit, I am putting you all in the secret passages you so kindly discovered for me."

As though Hamil had been a sack, he dragged him along the floor and the passage to the panel door, where he picked him up and dumped him inside the passage. He dragged each of the three along and, handling them pretty roughly, dumped them inside the passage. As he brought each one he would put his foot inside the door and push the previous one further along, holding the edge of the panelling as leverage. Griff was the last. When he was in, Greatorex closed the panel door and locked it. Then he remembered that Griff had the key to the room holding the boy Denver. Fortunately Griff was nearest the door. Greatorex opened the panel door and switching his torch on climbed in and searched Griff's pockets. He was unable to find any key. He was about to ungag Griff and ask him what had happened to the key, when the three-note gong of the front-door bell sounded. The police had arrived. Greatorex was unperturbed. His madness took the form of a firm belief in his ability to outwit and overcome anyone who obstructed him. He began thinking about the key. The only answer was that one of the boys had it. He flashed his torch on Hamil.

"Have you the key of the room Denver is in?"

Hamil shook his head.

"Has the other boy the key?"

Hamil thought, 'Find out. I am not telling you.' His

head remained motionless. Greatorex asked the question again. Still no head movement.

"I see that he has," Greatorex said.

He closed and locked the panel door, stepped over the figures of Baker and Cookie, and hurried along the passage, down the steep steps and along to the exit, where Pat lay. Silently he proceeded to search Pat's pockets and found the key. Pat revealed that he was conscious.

"Ye swine, ye. I'll get even with ye yet," came from his lips.

Greatorex made no reply. He was hurrying back, up the steep steps, along the passage, stepping over the bound forms. He unlocked the panel door, climbed out into the corridor, closed the door and locked it, and hurried along to Denver's room. He opened the door and switched on the light. The figure in the bed sat up. Denver had obviously been asleep. With a friendly smile, Greatorex came forward.

"Thank God, we have found you. Are you all right, my boy? You remember me, don't you? I came to the school the other day."

"Yes, sir. Have you come to take me away?"

"I have indeed. I knew your father in South Africa. That is why I have been searching for you. We have the police here now. They are looking for the men who took you. As soon as they have gone, I will take you back to the school. I must just pop down to the police. You stay there. I'll be back in a minute."

"Could you get me a drink, sir. I'm so thirsty."

"That's all right. I will bring one up."

With another friendly smile, Greatorex left the room. As he came to the gallery, he looked down into the hall. The police had come in. He called down to them.

"Hullo. I am so sorry. I was talking to my boy. He heard the gong. I didn't hear it."

He went down the stairway. Inspector Witing and two policemen were there.

"Well, Officer, you keep late hours. What can I do for you at this time of the night, or is it morning?"

Witing said, "We got a telephone message which was cut off when the boy began to speak——"

Greatorex interrupted. "So that is what he was doing. I came into the library and found a boy at the telephone. I asked him who he was and what he wanted, but he dodged round me and was out of the front door before I could catch him. I have never heard of such a thing, in the middle of the night. What did he want? Oh, you said he was cut off."

"Yes, he was cut off from the police station, but he had already spoken to the night operator at the exchange."

"Ah, what did he say? I should like to know what his game was."

"Well, Mr. Greatorex, he said that the boy who was kidnapped was at the Grange, Werley."

"At the Grange?" Greatorex gasped, as though staggered at such an incredible suggestion.

"That's what he said, sir, and if you have no objection we should like to look round the place. I understand you are only living in part of it, and it's a biggish

place. You never know, someone may have planted him in part of the building you are not using."

"Oh, I hardly think that is likely. I have three men-servants here. They are all out tonight, but they should be back first thing tomorrow. But come along. Where would you like to start? Downstairs or upstairs?"

"I think we'll start upstairs."

"Right. Just a minute, I want to get a drink for my boy. He only arrived this evening. Had rather an unpleasant journey. We had a lot to tell each other."

"I'll come with you. I'd like to get the geography of this place," Inspector Witing said. He gave a knowing look to his two men, indicating that they should remain in the hall. He had already stationed a man outside the front door and three others, one on each side of the house.

Greatorex went through a corridor to a palatial pantry. He took a glass and poured some orange juice in, then opened a big refrigerator and filled the glass with ice water from a jug.

"There we are. Now come along, Officer."

They returned to the hall and up the wide stairway. One man accompanied Witing and Greatorex, the other remained in the hall. Greatorex took the corridor in which the first room was Griff's. He opened the door and switched on the light."

"This is my valet's room. We are not using the domestic accommodation."

The inspector went in, opened two wardrobe doors and came out. The next room was Denver's.

"Here we are," Greatorex said cheerfully. He went in and handed the glass to the boy.

"Thanks," Denver said, looking with interest at the policemen. He took a sip of the drink.

Witing said, "Are you all right, son?"

"Yes thanks," Denver replied brightly. "I'm quite all right now. I was thirsty."

Those last three words robbed the preceding remark, with the tell-tale 'now' at the end, from any meaning which might have aroused the inspector's suspicions. As Greatorex came out, he said, with a smile,

"I'll come back when these gentlemen have gone."

"Thank you, sir," Denver replied.

As Greatorex closed the door, the inspector said,

"He treats you with more respect than the average modern boy gives his father."

Greatorex replied, "I was always brought up to call my father, 'Sir.' I have brought my boy up in the same fashion."

The next room was the one in which Baker, Cookie and Griff had been chloroformed. When Greatorex opened the door, the inspector went in and immediately sniffed.

"Chloroform," he said. "What has chloroform been used for here?"

Greatorex chuckled. "Oh, that's my cook. He always carries a bottle round to get grease out of his clothes. It's the best solvent for fats, you know. This is not his room, but they use this room for various odd jobs. I think my valet uses it for stains on my clothes."

The inspector looked into the wardrobes, glanced at the bed by the window.

"Have these beds been used lately?"

"Not that I know of," Greatorex replied. "Though I believe the servants use them for an occasional doss in the afternoon."

"You're lucky to have three servants these days," the inspector remarked. "They take things pretty easy, don't they?"

"I pay them well, and don't work them too hard," Greatorex replied.

The party moved on. Baker's and Cookie's rooms were inspected, then room after room which were clearly not in use, although all beautifully furnished. So throughout the big house. More than half an hour had elapsed before the party returned to the great hall.

Greatorex said, "Well, there you are, Officer. We have inspected every corner of the place. As a matter of fact it is the first time that I have seen completely through the house. I could wish that you had found the boy in some of those unused rooms. I am sorry you have been disappointed."

But Witing was not satisfied. He said, "The boy certainly is not here, but that does not explain that telephone call. Can you give me any reason, Mr. Greatorex, why a boy should come into your house in the middle of the night and tell the operator to put him through to the police urgently. He told the man that he had heard the boy Denver say that his father would never pay up, and he told the operator to hurry, as he said that he might be caught at any moment."

Greatorex knew that the inspector was becoming almost desperate, as far as a police inspector ever becomes desperate. The only clues connected with the

missing boy's whereabouts were both connected with the Grange: the first one, Greatorex's visit to the dormitory; the second one, this strange midnight telephone call, which the operator knew had come from the Grange telephone. The man only wanted one small further clue connected with the Grange, and Greatorex knew that he would find himself under arrest. The solution to the whole matter flashed into the madman's mind. He said,

"Yes, I think I can give you the reason. It is a question of revenge. I know the boy. He has been here before. This house is very old, and there is what is called a priest's hole, with a secret passage out into the woods. This boy found it by accident and one day I found him here in the library. I will not tell you what I did to him to arouse his desire for revenge, until I have shown you the priest's hole and the secret passage."

Greatorex saw that he had aroused intense interest in the minds of the three policemen. He went over to the bookshelves and raised the lever which unlocked the door from the library side. He swung the door open. Exclamations of amazement came from the three men.

"Now," Greatorex said. "I shall need your help to open the door into the secret passage. Have you a torch?"

The inspector handed over his torch. Greatorex stepped into the hole. He said, "It took three of us to open this door. Will you come in here a moment? I shall want one man to push on the wall at each end,

and one to lift the seat when I lift the lever. There may have been another lever which releases the catches on the end walls, but I have not been able to find it, so we had to do it by main strength."

The two constables stepped into the hole and took up position facing the end walls.

"Now, Officer, will you come here and when I give the word and lift the lever, you will see a crack appear along the panelling." He indicated a line along the top of the panels. "Then you lift the seat and the two constables must push hard at each end of the side walls. Then, be careful, as the whole of this wall falls slowly back and reveals the entrance to the secret passage. Now, are you ready? I will shine the torch on the crack in the panelling."

"Greatorex stepped back, and the inspector took his place and bent down and grasped the underside of the seat. Greatorex shone the torch on the place where he had said the crack would appear. He stepped further back and laid a hand on the door.

"Now."

The two constables leant and pushed against the side walls; the inspector grasped the seat and watched for the crack to appear. Slam! The door closed with a bang and the three men were in complete darkness. The walls were too thick for them to hear maniacal laughter in the library, as Greatorex locked the door of the priest's hole.

"Ha! The poor fools thought they could catch me." He laughed again. "And now, they do not know it, but I am going to roast them, together with those other

poor fools who thought they were going to hand me over to the police. I'll roast them all together." He hurried out of the library.

In a corner of the garage he found two two-gallon cans of petrol which he took into the library. Then he unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out a thick wad of five-pound notes and pocketed them. With a final look round, he went out into the hall on the way to his bedroom, to pack a light handbag.

"Excuse me, sir." A constable was standing in the hall, just inside the front door. The thought flashed through Greatorrex's mind, "I shall have to kill this one myself." He asked the man what he wanted.

"I just wondered where the inspector was, sir. Me and the other men round the house expected him out before this."

Greatorrex thought, "Me and the other men round the house." The inspector had been taking no chances. Confound the man! He had intended leaving in the car. Now he would have to leave on foot. He would leave by the subterranean passage. It did not matter a great deal. A five-mile walk into Salisbury and he could catch a train there. He would not have the boy with him—he would have been dealt with. He chuckled. Yes, he would deal with him in the underground chamber where the stake was. Probably this arrangement was better. It would certainly be harder to trace him if he went by train.

He said, "The inspector will not be very long. He is on the phone to Scotland Yard. We found some traces of the boy in an unused room, and a letter. The

inspector is asking Scotland Yard to enquire at an address in the letter. We think there may still be a man in the house, but the inspector said if he tried to get out, your men would catch him."

"Thank you, sir, thank you." The constable hurried out of the front door, afraid that a man might have got by while he was absent from his post.

Greatorrex locked and bolted the front door, then ran upstairs. He quickly packed a small suitcase, which he placed outside the panel door. Then he went to Griff's room and took Denver's clothes from a drawer. He went into Denver's room and laid the clothes on the bed.

"There you are, my boy. Now we shan't be long. Get into your clothes as quickly as you can, and we'll get along."

Denver hopped out of bed, and began dressing.

"Are we far from the school, sir? I don't know where I am."

"We are in a very old house full of secret passages. We are going out through one to take a short cut. The men who kidnapped you are tied up in one of the passages. The police will take them away soon. When you are dressed, stay in this room till I come. I shall not be long."

Denver dressed, in a slightly perplexed frame of mind, but relief at his liberation was the chief emotion. He had no idea that Mr. Greatorrex was in any way connected with the men who had kidnapped him.

Greatorrex returned to the library and began sprinkling petrol liberally over the carpet and furniture and

curtains and rows of richly bound books. Then along the carpet in the passage to the great dining-room. When the tin was empty, he fetched the second tin and continued the work, giving special attention to the oak panelling. When the second tin was empty, he screwed the cap on and returned the empty tins to the garage. Coming back through the kitchen, he tore two pages off a newspaper and rolled each into a ball. Then, into the great hall and up the stairway to the gallery. He lit one of the paper balls and turned it over slowly till it was well alight. Then he threw the flaming ball down on to one of the petrol-soaked carpets in the hall. There was no need to use the second ball. With a soft 'plop' the carpet became a sheet of flame, and in an instant every article of furniture in the hall was flaming fiercely. The place was an inferno. Greatorex had opened all the doors. In the moment before he turned and ran he observed that the flames had spread like a flash to the other rooms.

"Come along, quickly," he called to Denver from the door of the room. The boy ran out and paused at the sight of a mass of flame at the end of the corridor where it met the gallery. The roar and crackle of the fire was frightening.

"Quickly. Come along," Greatorex called peremptorily. He was standing by the open panel door with his suitcase in his hand.

"The house is on fire," Denver gasped in horror, as he reached the panel door.

"That is obvious. In here quickly. Mind the bodies."

At that moment, the lights in the corridor went out.

Greatorex flashed his torch on and bundled Denver through the opening. The sight of the bound bodies in their contorted positions and the gagged heads shocked the boy to the core.

"These men will be killed!" he cried. "We must save them."

Bent double, Greatorex climbed through the opening and pushed Griff to one side. He closed and locked the door, shutting out the sound of the fire. When he turned to step over the bodies, he found Denver hacking with a clasp knife at the line fastening Hamil's bound hands to his bound feet. The line parted as Greatorex kicked the knife out of the boy's hand.

"What are you doing? We must save them!" Denver screamed.

"Get on," Greatorex hissed. He passed the torch to the hand holding the suitcase. With his right hand he gripped the back of Denver's coat and shorts and lifted him off the ground. Denver struggled, but Greatorex stepped over the bodies and carried him along.

"Please let me go back and cut their ropes, then they can get out," Denver pleaded jerkily as he was carried along. "The police will not be able to get them in time. They will be burned to death."

"The police are in no position to help them. They would have obstructed me, so I have shut them into a secret room and they cannot get out. Ha-ha, ha-ha, ha!"

The ring of insanity in those laughs was a fearful sound, doubly so in the eerie conditions of the secret passage with its still, impenetrable darkness in which the torch cut out a wedge of light. Denver was very frightened, but he was no coward.

"I think you must be mad," he said. "Please put me down. Where are you taking me?"

Greatorex put him down and released his grip.

"Out of this building. I am sane enough, but these poor fools who obstructed me are quite mad. Now turn round and go down those steps backwards. Quickly, if you don't want to be thrown down."

Denver turned round and went down the steep steps, followed by Greatorex, who then continued along the passage, pushing the boy in front of him. They turned a corner, and the exit aperture appeared in the light of the torch. Beyond was another bound form from which a voice asked,

"Who is that?"

The voice was strained and a little hoarse, which was not surprising considering that Pat had been tied up in such an unnatural and exhausting position for over an hour, and had been calling for help continually. Denver realised from the voice that it must be O'Rory or Hamil. He ran forward, jumping the exit hole and, knowing that Greatorex would be after him, attacked the reef knot in the line fastening Pat's arms and feet together.

"Come back," Greatorex called, striding over the three-foot hole, but keeping his torch on the two boys, which was lucky for Denver, as he could see the knot and had it unfastened before Greatorex picked him up as he had done before, and swung him round and deliberately dropped him through the exit hole. In an agony of fear, Denver screamed as he fell. His immediate contact with hard stone steps and a couple of bumps

before he reached the bottom were a surprise and a relief. He sat for a second, unable to get his mind straight after this bumpy descent into pitch-black darkness. His body reported bruises and abrasions in a number of places, but the pain did not bother him seriously. He was endeavouring to discover where he was, what had happened to change his rescuer into this terrifying ogre who was leaving the men and two of his schoolmates to die in the fire, and what he could do to escape. These thoughts were dispelled by the flash of the torch as Greatorrex came down the steps.

"Get on," he snapped, and pushed Denver to his feet with one foot. "You have not far to go, then you are going to be the sacrifice which will square the wrong your father did to me fifteen years ago."

The intense venom with which these words were uttered caused Denver's heart to miss a beat. The conflicting emotions he had suffered in the previous hour, relief at being rescued, his dismay at sight of the fire, and the shock of seeing the men and his schoolmates being left to their fate, had overwhelmed his stout little heart. He trudged forwards, a hopeless little figure with tears streaming down his cheeks.



CHAPTER TEN

Desperate Situation

WHEN the door slammed in the priest's hole, there was a momentary silence as the inspector and two constables, in the pitch darkness, waited for it to open again. But when a minute had elapsed and there was no sign that Greatorex was endeavouring to open the door, the possible fact that they were prisoners had to be faced. Inspector Witing said grimly, "Very clever. But he doesn't realise he's a prisoner himself. He'll never get away from the house, and when the boys outside take him, they'll want to know where we are. In the meantime, we've got to get out of this, and quickly too."

"It looked a bit fishy, sir, when he borrowed your

torch. But we were all so taken with the idea of this secret room——”

“We forgot a policeman’s first duty, which is to be suspicious,” Witing interrupted. “Quite right, Constable Hopkins. Now the first thing we’ve got to do is to see what matches we’ve got. I’ve got a box nearly full.”

The second constable had a lighter, but Hopkins did not smoke. Witing struck a match, and Hopkins exclaimed, “Hullo, what’s this?”

It was Pat’s canvas holdall. Hopkins zipped back the top. “It looks as though the last man here left his working kit. Look at this, sir.”

The match went out. Witing struck another, and Hopkins emptied the contents of the bag.

“Well, better be lucky than rich,” the second constable remarked. “Here’s all we want to get out of here. A torch too, and batteries.” He picked up the torch and flashed it on, just as the second match went out.

Witing took the torch. “Let’s examine this cell and find the best place to attack. Now here’s where the door was.... Ah, very clever, here’s the crack, along this line of panelling. You’re a bit of a carpenter, Hopkins. See what you can do with a chisel and hammer. I’ll hold the torch.”

Hopkins took a hammer and chisel. “We’ve got to find the vertical crack at this end of the door. Then we get the panel off about the middle. Once we find what’s locking the door, it shouldn’t take long. This panelling is oak, tough stuff.”

Hopkins found the vertical line, then worked

steadily. The chips flew, but to those watching progress seemed slow. After a quarter of an hour, Hopkins exclaimed, "There we are. There's an oak tongue locking the door. A bit more and we'll be able to lift it." All at once he stopped working, and all three listened. They had heard faintly a soft concussion and then a low murmuring roar, which steadily increased.

The inspector sniffed. "I can smell burning."

The second constable said, "The house is on fire."

Dulled though it was, the roar and crackle were as ominous and awe-inspiring as the approach of some giant.

"Keep going, constable. We've got to get through somehow," Witing said.

Hopkins hammered away, but it was slow, arduous work, and the tiny room was becoming warm and close. Witing was becoming a little impatient,

"Come along, man. Surely you can lift that tongue now."

"She won't come, sir. I don't know what's holding it but she just won't budge. You try it, sir."

Witing changed places with Hopkins and took the hammer and chisel, while the second constable held the torch, whose light was becoming very dim. It happened to be an old torch that Pat had tossed in, just in case it might be needed. Witing hammered and prized and wrenched, but the tongue refused to budge. The atmosphere was becoming unpleasant to breathe, the crackle and roar of the fire louder. Then the torch went out, and they were in complete darkness.

"Another battery, quick, man," Witing said, as he

dropped the hammer and chisel, and struck a match.

Hopkins took a battery from the bag. The second constable was having trouble with the torch. To the other two he seemed to be fiddling with it.

"What's the matter? Can't you unscrew it?" Witing demanded.

"She's coming now. The battery's stuck inside."

The constable tapped the torch on the seat. The old battery dropped out, also the spring, but this was not noticed. The new battery was inserted and the top screwed on, but no light would come. Suddenly there was a crash that shook the little room.

"That was the ceiling," Hopkins stated.

The air was now so oppressive that breathing was an effort. The reek of burning wood was an offence to the nostrils. The constable unscrewed the torch and slid the battery out. He realised that the spring was missing.

"Spring's on the floor. Let's have a light down here."

Two matches were used before they found the spring and put it into the torch, which produced a light again. Witing picked up the hammer and chisel and set to work once more. The panelling was hot to the touch and it was clear that the door was burning on the other side. All three men were perspiring and coughing spasmodically.

"Got it," Witing exclaimed. He grasped the knobs and pulled. The door swung open and a blast of flame and smoke poured into the room accompanied by a terrifying roar. Witing flopped back on to the seat before the scorching onslaught. The second constable

dropped the torch and flung himself against the door, which swung to, shutting out the blazing inferno beyond.

In the relative silence, Witing gasped, "My God, we'll never get through that."

"It's like opening the door to Hell," Watkins exclaimed.

"Be you burned, Inspector?" the second constable asked.

The torch was still alight on the floor. Witing got to his feet. "Nothing much, only scorched. We must try these other walls."

The smoke-filled room was like an oven. All three men were coughing and making horrible gasping sounds as they tried to breathe. The inspector picked up the torch and the hammer and chisel.

"Go for this wall," he muttered hoarsely, and handed the hammer and chisel to Hopkins.

The torch shone dimly through the grey smoke. With smarting eyes Hopkins attacked the panelling on the wall opposite the door. It never occurred to any of them that the way out might be through the end of the room. Greatorax had implanted the idea that the way out was through the wall carrying the seat and this idea remained fixed. Hopkins missed his aim with the hammer and caught his hand an awful blow and dropped the chisel. He remained standing, one hand against the wall coughing and gasping.

The second constable picked up the hammer and chisel and attacked the panelling savagely, where Hopkins had loosened it. Getting the chisel behind it, he

prized it up and got his fingers behind it and pulled with both hands. The panel broke from the wall, revealing solid stone with no sign of a door.

The constable groaned with eyes shut and drooping head. "Nothing there. She's a stone wall." He suddenly straightened up. "I won't be roast in an oven. I'm going through the fire." He made to open the door, but Witing blocked his way. "Take it easy. We're still alive and that way lies certain death. The way out is through the ends. It must be. Hold the torch."

Witing groped for the hammer and chisel. The second constable directed the torch, but its beam was clouded by the floating wreaths of smoke. Witing found the tools and set to work on the end containing the door into the passage, just as the door into the library burst into flame.

"My God, we've had it," the inspector whispered. He dropped the torch and sank on to the seat. The second constable had the chisel against the panelling, which to his amazement began moving away from him.

When Denver released the line between Pat's tied hands and feet, Pat flopped forward on his face and lay at full length. His shoulders ached intolerably and the pain in his back was almost unbearable. He heard Denver's scream and saw Greatorrex and the light disappear down the steps, leaving him again in complete darkness. At last he managed to sit up with one shoulder against the wall, and then to reach a kneeling position.

He tried to think of any sharp edge he had

encountered in the course of his wanderings in the passage, and decided the only possible place was the edge of the hole down to the steps. He began to work his way there on his knees. It was slow progress. He could only work each knee forward an inch at a time by moving his legs from side to side. Then an unpleasant fear arose. If he fell down the hole he would be finished, probably break his neck. With this in mind, he continued edging forward but leaned back.

Pat was Irish, every fibre of him, which meant that he acted first and thought afterwards. This was brought home to him when his knee felt the edge of the hole, and he was in a quandary as to the position which would enable him to rub his bound wrists along that edge. Gingerly he edged back and turned round. Vividly conscious of the risk of falling, he tentatively leaned back. He could just get his finger tips to one side of his ankles and felt the ledge. It was a smooth edge, nothing sharp about it at all. This disappointment was bad enough, but, in the effort to lean back, he all but went over backwards down the hole. The frantic effort of recovery and the icy feeling in the pit of his stomach were so frightening that he scrambled away from the hole and sat back panting. And, as happens in moments of crisis, his wits became doubly acute; he remembered his canvas holdall in the priest's hole. He refused to listen to the sane part of his mind which told him that the bag would no longer be there, the driving force within him said that it had to be there. Pat believed that in the programme of his destiny, he had been made to leave the bag there on his

first visit, so that it could save him now. It contained a knife and two chisels, which he could jam between his feet and quickly cut his bonds through.

In the excitement of what seemed so simple a solution, he struggled to his feet, keeping one shoulder against the wall so as to be certain that his back was towards the hole, and hopped towards the door of the priest's hole. He lost his balance once and fell down. He rolled over against the opposite wall, which was the library wall. In getting to his feet he felt that the wall was giving out a gentle warmth. This seemed so strange that he leaned against it and pressed his cheek to the wall. It was definitely warm, and his ear detected a curious roar and vibration. The explanation occurred to him at once. The wall there must be the back of the fireplace, and for some reason they had lit a fire. This meant nothing to him. He hopped along, past the ramp up to the spy-hole, till he reached the door of the priest's hole. He turned his back to it and got his fingers to the disc that was the handle. He could feel a faint tapping as he slowly turned the disc and, getting his fingers behind it, pulled and jerked to open it. Suddenly it swung open as though pushed by an invisible force, and he was knocked flat on his face. He heard a roar and crackling and a voice.

When the second constable felt the door opening, he dropped the chisel and gave the door a great push, crying out that the door was open. He bent down and helped Witing to his feet and urged him through the doorway, into the glorious cool air of the passage. The two men drew in great draughts of life-giving air. The

torch was still alight, on the floor. The second constable picked it up and shone it into the hole, but the flames from the burning panelling were lighting the whole place, revealing Hopkins asprawl where he had slid from the seat to the floor. The second constable pocketed the torch and leaped into the far corner and grabbed his unconscious mate round the body and dragged him out.

By the flickering light in the passage, Witing saw Pat, and immediately began casting off his lashings. When they were off he said,

"Are you all right, son?"

"Sure I am now," Pat replied. "What's happened?"

"Case for artificial respiration here, Inspector," the second constable said.

Leaving Pat to exercise his stiff wrists and legs, Witing helped to turn Hopkins over and the second constable proceeded to work on the limp body. Pat was gazing in consternation at the flames. Without stopping to realise the foolishness of his action, he took a deep breath and darted into the priest's hole. He picked the holdall up and bundled most of the tools into it, ignoring the scorching heat from the burning panelling. Then he foolishly took a breath and began coughing, but he grabbed the bag and stepped out of the hole, closing the door with a bang behind him.

The inspector was holding the torch and pointing it at Hopkins on the floor.

"He's breathing," he announced.

"What happened?" Pat demanded again. "How did you get in there and how did the house catch fire?"

The second constable helped Hopkins sit up with his back against the wall. He said, "You're all right now, Charlie. Take it easy and breathe deep."

The inspector turned his attention to Pat. "We were got in there by a trick. Greatorox must have set fire to the house. But he must have been taken. I had men all round the house. And——"

Pat interrupted. "Wait. Me friend Ham is upstairs."

He sprinted down the passage, taking his torch out and switching it on.

Hamil's state of mind, when he was dumped on to the floor of the passage with the three men, and darkness enveloped them as the door shut, is better imagined than described. His face ached from the blow he had received. The line between his wrists and feet had been drawn so tight that he was lying in an arched position, on his stomach. His mouth and nose were only a few inches above the floor of the passage, and the dust of centuries had an unpleasant mouldy smell. Rough treatment has a dulling effect on the mind and senses. Three times he had been pushed further along the passage and the man next him had been partially lying on him, but he had wriggled free. Greatorox had said that he had signed his death warrant through knowing too much, but he could not believe that this was the end. Someone must find him. After all it must be Saturday now, and Marshall and Crew and Mortimer were going to explore the passages on Saturday afternoon. Supposing it was half past midnight now, they could not arrive till half-past three, that was fif-

teen hours. Would he be dead by then? His arms and wrists and back, and the back of his neck, were beginning to ache and this was only after perhaps ten minutes. With a great effort, his arms and back hurting at every movement, he managed to wriggle a little away from the man next to him. He was about to throw himself over on to his side, when he felt that the man had wriggled close to him, and was making grunting noises through his gag. He grunted in reply, then edged away again, and threw himself over on his side. Obviously the man realised what he was trying to do, for he also had lain over on his side.

Hamil wriggled again till his fingers touched the hands of the man. He squeezed with his fingers and the man squeezed back. This was comforting. He began to explore the line fastening the man's hands to his feet. He wriggled up, he wriggled down, running his fingers along the line. It was extraordinary, but he could not find the knot. Again and again he worked up and down without discovering that elusive knot. Suddenly the man's fingers brushed his fingers aside and began exploring Hamil's line. It was terribly slow work, because Greatorex's devilish ingenuity had incapacitated the arms, which were drawn taut. Every movement up and down the line necessitated a wriggling squirm of the whole body, and the man was no more successful in finding the knot on Hamil's line than Hamil had been with his.

After a time the man stopped and lay still, then he squirmed and jerked till he had rolled himself over on to his other side. Hamil could appreciate this; his

own right arm, on which he had been lying, was becoming numb. He followed the man's example and lay thus for a time. The aches in his shoulders and arms and neck seemed to rise and fall in a series of waves. At times the feeling of being in the clutch of a dreadful nightmare drove him to a state of frenzy in which he would have screamed had it been possible. Then the panel door opened and he heard Greatorrex telling someone to come along quickly. He could also hear a curious roaring, explained a moment later by Denver's voice saying that the house was on fire. Then there was the flash of a torch and Denver saying, 'These men will be killed. We must save them.' Then the bang of the panel door being shut, and Denver hacking at the line, and the relief as it parted and the agonising strain on his arms was eased.

When Greatorrex and the boy had passed on, and silence and darkness had enveloped the place again, the fire was the chief thought in Hamil's mind. He struggled to a sitting position and remembered the clatter of the falling knife. He could not recollect whether they had stopped to pick it up but felt sure they had not. If he could secure this knife, he could release the others and they could escape through the exit passage. Speed was vital if they were to get out of the house before it began to collapse or they were burned to death.

He quickly thought of the best way of searching the passage. With his back against one wall, and his feet against the other, he began to work his way along. Presently his heels touched the knife and he heard it

rattle. He slewed round and secured it. The knife in his grasp was like new life. He quickly worked his way back till he felt the body of the man who had been next to him. He dropped the knife on the floor once or twice to signify that he had it. The man understood and turned his back to him. Hamil soon cut the line between the man's hands and feet. Then he gingerly felt the cord binding the wrists and proceeded to saw at this. It was a sharp knife and the lashing soon parted. The man sat up and must have untied the gag. He spoke and from his slight Yankee accent, Hamil knew it was Baker.

"Much obliged," he said. "Who are you? I guess we'll soon see."

Hands released the gag. "It's me, Hamil. Take the knife and cut my hands free."

A hand felt behind Hamil and took the knife. Hamil waited for the blessed severing of his bonds, but a voice said, "You wait. You're the scut that's got us in this mess. If you and the other one hadn't put us all out, we had his Nibs cold and ten thousand pounds as good as in our pocket. Now it's our turn."

Hamil could not believe his ears. "But I've saved you," he said. "You must do the same for me. I can show you the way out."

"You needn't bother. We know the way," Baker replied.

"But you can't leave me here."

"That's all you know, brother. We could do a lot worse for what you've done to us."

Baker was obviously releasing the others, as their voices broke the silence.

"Nice work, Bako. How d'you manage it?"

"The kid found a knife and cut me free. If we get going, we may catch his Nibs yet."

"Are you going to leave the kid here?"

"I'll say I am. Isn't he a witness? He knows the lot of us. From what his Nibs said, the other one is tied up somewhere. With them two out of it, we're all right. If we can catch his Nibs with the kid, we hand them over to the police and still stand a chance for that ten thousand."

"But how are we going to find our way out? We've got no torch."

"His Nibs went that way and we can go too. I'll bet the kid's got a torch."

"But where's our clothes. We've got to have clothes."

"We'll meet someone with clothes and take 'em off 'em. The first thing's to get out of this."

"I know the way out without a torch," Hamil cried. "You'll never find it without me."

"Hold him, Griff, while I get his torch."

Groping hands found Hamil and held him down by the shoulders while other hands searched his pockets.

"He hasn't got one. We'll have to take him with us if he knows the way."

"Ssk... There's a light. Someone's coming. His Nibs coming back. Lie down. We'll get him."

A light appeared at the end of the passage and hurrying footsteps could be heard.

Hamil did not know whether to cry out or not in case it was Greatorex. He waited as the light began to get brighter.

"Hullo, who is that?" Pat said as the torch picked up the recumbent forms.

"Pat, it's me," Hamil replied. "Those men were going to——"

The three forms rose like silent ghosts and flung themselves at Pat. Three to one, they were too much for him. In a moment they had him on the ground.

"Grab his torch. Get a piece of line," Baker snapped.

Griff had the torch and brought lengths of cord, which he knotted together. They bound Pat in similar fashion to the way they had all been bound.

"Ye swine, ye won't get anywhere," Pat snarled. "There are three policemen waiting for ye down below." He cried, "Help!" but got no further, as a hand was jammed over his mouth.

"Give us a gag, quick," Baker said softly.

They gagged Pat, but Hamil cried, "Help, h——" He got no further, as one of the men grabbed a towel and jammed it across his mouth and fastened it tight behind his head. Then they took a piece of line and tied his bound hands to his feet, as they had been tied before.

"Did you hear what he said?" Baker whispered. "The cops are down below."

He had hardly spoken before a second light cast its reflection on the darkness at the end of the passage.

"Drag the kids back and play possum again," Baker whispered.

They pulled Pat and Hamil back towards the panel door, then all three lay down on the ground and the torch was switched off.

The light came steadily towards them.

"Are you there, son? You shouldn't have run off and left me like that. Where are you?"

Again the three forms in underclothes rose up and the inspector was the centre of a struggling mêlée. The result was the same. These men were experts at roughhousing. They got the inspector on to the ground.

"You'll suffer for this," he gasped, and shouted "Hopkins, Brown, help, help." He got no further, as a towel was wound round his mouth and tied fast.

"Tie him up," Baker ordered. Then he said, "Wait. I said we'd meet someone with clothes on. Get him on his feet."

Witing was jerked to his feet and held by the two on his arms. Baker undid his tunic and the front of his trousers. Although the inspector struggled frantically, it took only a few minutes to take off his tunic and trousers, then he was securely bound. Baker dressed himself in the uniform, which fitted as well as could be expected.

He said, "Guess we'll run through his pockets." He found the revolver. "Say, this is all we want. Come on, let's find our next lot of clothes."

They made their way along the passage. Their shoes had not been removed by Pat and Hamil when taking their clothes for the escape chain from the window. At the bottom of the steep steps Baker led the way. Although he went wrong twice, they found the passage to the exit in less than five minutes.

The atmosphere was very close. They could feel the warmth given out by the wall on their right. The torch

picked up the two constables. Hopkins was still sitting down. The second constable said,

"Did you find him, sir?"

"Yes, he found us," Baker replied in his quiet, sinister voice. "Stick your hands up, coppers, if you want to live."

He pushed the revolver forward in the light of the torch.

"Where's the inspector? Who are you?" the second constable demanded. The dazzle of the torch prevented his seeing much, but Griff's torch behind outlined the uniform Baker was wearing.

"We're the folk you're looking for, copper, and we're holding the guns. Stick your hands up, quick, or you're for it."

But the second constable was made of stern, stubborn material. He considered it beneath the dignity of a constable to put his hands up in front of a gun. He walked steadily towards the torch.

"Put your hands up, you fool. I don't want to shoot you," Baker snapped.

"Where is the inspector?" the second constable demanded. As he spoke he sprang at Baker and knocked the torch out of his hand. But he had little chance against the three. He got both hands to the gun and tried to wrench it round to point at Baker, but Griff and Cookie each grabbed an arm and in a minute had the second constable at their mercy. Hopkins was still so groggy that he was unable to put up any fight. In less than a quarter of an hour, the two constables, in their underclothes, were tied, hands and feet, back to

back. The cord which had bound Pat was not sufficient to bind the two men separately. While the indomitable second constable told them they would be caught outside and he would be a witness at their trial, Griff and Cookie dressed themselves in the two uniforms.

Griff said, " We've got so far, Bako, but how are we going to tackle the thing in the passage?"

"If his Nibs and the kids can do it," Baker replied, "so can we."

One by one they descended the steps and set out along the passage.





CHAPTER ELEVEN

At the Eleventh Hour

It is always interesting to trace the sequence of events that led up to certain situations. When Greatorex started the fire, it was 1.40 a.m. The constable at the entrance to the Grange had been walking slowly up and down, ears and eyes alert for any movement. The only light visible from the front was in the tall window above the front door, and the two narrow windows on each side. Suddenly the windows of the whole ground floor were ablaze with light. Every window revealed leaping flames within. It was such a transformation from the quiet, dark front of the building a moment before, that the man stood spellbound, hardly able to believe his eyes. Then he sprang to action. The inspector

and two men were within. He rushed to the front door. It was securely locked. He ran towards the side of the house, calling the other men. One came running at once. On seeing the blaze from the windows, he cried, "Where've you been? How long's it been alight? We must get the alarm out. There's a phone at the lodge."

This man was the police van driver. He jumped into the van with the first constable, and they sped down the drive, the headlights lighting up the trees. They drew up at the lodge and banged on the door. In a minute steps sounded on the stairs and the door opened. Bulge stood there in striped pyjamas,

"What's the trouble?"

"The big house is afire. Where's your phone?"

The phone was in the hall. They got through to the Salisbury fire station and gave the alarm.

"We've got to get back," the van driver said. "Keep the gates open. You had better stand outside with a torch, so's they'll know where to stop. Every minute counts."

They got into the van, which turned and shot off up the drive again.

Bulge went upstairs and quickly dressed. He knew that by the time the fire brigade arrived, the house would be a torch in the countryside. The brigade would not need anyone in the road to help them find the house. He must get to the house and help save what he could. Mrs. Bulge came downstairs and put the kettle on. Tea would be needed sooner or later. Bulge stopped in the tiny hall and picked up the

phone. The night watchman at Ramsden College was his friend. He rang through and caught the man in his office, having a cup of tea between rounds. Bulge gave him the news, then set out for the Grange.

Almost at the same time, Crew awoke in what seemed the middle of the night. He always kept a torch and a watch beside his bed. He reached out and switched on the torch and looked at the time, ten minutes to two. He directed the torch to Pat's and Hamil's beds to make sure that the pair had returned. It was a nasty shock when he saw that the beds were unoccupied. At the same moment, he remembered what had awakened him, a most vivid dream. He had been flying in a plane and Hamil was the pilot. And suddenly Hamil had cried out that his hands were caught in the webbing behind his seat and Crew must take over as the plane was going into a dive. It was Hamil's agonised cry that had awakened Crew. Even now that he was awake, Crew seemed to hear Hamil's cry for help. The feeling of that cry was so vivid in Crew's mind, that he flashed the torch round the room to see if Ham was there. It was quite uncanny, as though Hamil's spirit was in the room demanding Crew's help. He got out of bed and switched the light on, and as soon as he began to move he knew that the call was something he could not ignore.

He gave Mortimer a shake. "Mort, Mort, wake up."

Mortimer sat up, blinking his eyes in the light.

"What is it? Are you ill, Crewee?"

Rapidly Crew told him of the dream. "Pat and Ham are in trouble. I have never felt so certain of anything. We must go and look for them."

Crew had begun dressing. Mortimer put his feet on the floor.

"This is madness, Crewee. Are you sure it's not just a bad dream?"

"No. I was never so certain of anything. Do you remember we were all discussing telepathy the other day? Well, I know that I've had an S.O.S. from Ham, and I dare not ignore it."

Mortimer said, "I think we should tell Moore, or else get the police and tell them all we know. There are four men at the Grange. What can we do against them? I cannot see what we can do alone."

Crew stopped in his rapid dressing. "I've got a better idea than that. Moore is an understanding bloke, but he would only talk. D'you remember what Marshall said about Naval history being made by men who laid the enemy out while the red tape merchants were still talking? Marshall is the man. I'm going to ring him up."

The Head Prefect of each of Ramsden's four houses had a telephone in his bedroom, as part of the inter-communication system. Crew picked up the phone. The night exchange was in the night watchman's office. The man was there, full of the news Bulge had given him of the fire at the Grange. Crew asked to be put through to Mr. Marshall, and gave his own name.

"Mr. Marshall. Very good, Mr. Crew. Something happened?"

"No," Crew said, "but I must speak to Mr. Marshall urgently."

"Very good. I'll put you through. I've just heard the Grange is on fire."

Crew could hardly believe his ears. This news served to show that Ham's S.O.S. was real. He and Pat were obviously in terrible danger. Marshall's voice came on the line.

"Marshall speaking. Who is that?"

"This is Crew, sir. Pat and Hamil went to the Grange tonight to see if Denver was there. They're not back, and I woke up with an extraordinary dream that Ham was calling for help. Now the night watchman tells me the Grange is on fire. I think Pat and Ham are in trouble. Mort and I are going to look for them. Will you come?"

Without any hesitation, Marshall replied, "I'll get my car out. Open the main gates and meet me there. Bring torches. Good-bye." He rang off.

In under a quarter of an hour Crew and Mortimer, standing by the open gates, saw the lights of Marshall's car approaching. He stopped and they got in. As soon as they were speeding towards Werley, Marshall said,

"This may be a wild-goose chase, but you were right to ring me up. In any case we've got to find Pat and Hamil. I hope the result will justify our action. You can tell me about your dream later. This is no time for talking. We must decide first whether to go to the house or tackle your passage. I think your passage is the answer. If the house is on fire we might not get in. The first point is, can you recognise the place where we enter the wood?"

Mortimer replied that he thought he could. "Just after we came out of the wood on Wednesday and met you on the road, I was struck by a sequence of trees."

Although the car was doing fifty, and Marshall's eyes were concentrated on the road, he could not help being tickled by the calm, unhurried way in which Mortimer related each detail, completely unaffected by the urgent tenseness of Crew and himself. "A very large oak, then a clump of pines, another large oak and a second clump of pines. I remember wondering how those two combinations came to be planted."

"That's a beginning," Marshall said, as the car swept through the quiet village of Werley. "Keep your eyes skinned for your landmark. Try and think how far we had walked before you spotted these trees."

"Not very far. I should think a hundred yards."

"That's something anyway. Searching for a needle in a haystack would be child's play to trying to find your hole in the woods, in the dark, unless our dead-reckoning point on the road is fairly accurate. Has either of you an idea of the distance from the road your hole is?"

"Yes, I can give you that," Crew said. "I've always had a mania for counting distances in steps, ever since I read Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. The last time I measured my step on the sands at home, it was two foot six from heel to heel. The steps I took from the hole to the road were sixty-seven."

Marshall chuckled. "You four are an incredible lot. We really have something to go on now. You have brought torches?"

Crew said that they had. A few minutes later, Mortimer said, "There is my first clump of pines."

Marshall stopped when Mortimer said they were abreast of the second large oak tree.

"You two get out and walk a hundred yards. I'll follow."

"That's a hundred and twenty of my steps," Crew said.

He and Mortimer alighted and began walking, the car slowly following. When they had covered a hundred and twenty steps, Marshall parked the car partly on the verge of the road. They climbed into the wood.

Crew said, "You forgot to lock the car, sir."

"Never do, and always leave the key in. You never hear of an old car being pinched," Marshall replied. "Now we must organise to find the hole. You stay in the middle, Crew, and walk your sixty-seven steps into the wood. It's going to be difficult with the undergrowth; work it out as best you can. Mortimer and I will walk fifty steps away from you on either side. We'll give a shout when we've done our fifty. Then we all three walk into the wood, keeping in line. We'll each have to flash our torches to show where we are.

"Right-ho, sir. I'm ready," Crew said, a little impatiently.

"I want to get on just as much as you do," Marshall stated briskly. "But I intend to find the hole, not spend a lot of time groping. When you've done your sixty-seven, stand still and Mortimer and I will walk towards you looking as far to the right and left as our torches will show. Right, carry on, Mortimer."

This procedure was carried out. When Crew stopped and the others began walking towards him, almost at once Marshall, who was on the Salisbury side of Crew, called out,

"Tally ho! Here's your hole."

Crew and Mortimer hurried towards Marshall. Crew said, apologetically, "How right you were, sir. We might have groped for hours."

Marshall said, "Destroyers, quartering for a U-boat, work on the same lines."

They climbed down into the passage. Crew led the way, followed by Marshall and Mortimer, in that order.

"We'd better stick to one torch," Crew said. "Don't put yours on, we may need them later."

"Good idea. Conserve your ammunition," Marshall added.

They continued in silence. After a little, Crew said,

"It's funny. I don't feel any apprehension. Anyone else feel it?"

The others were experiencing a similar freedom from any fear.

"Wonderful, and there's the terror chamber ahead."

Crew had hardly spoken when they heard a treble voice calling, "Help, help. Who is that?"

Bending low, Crew began to run and the other followed suit. At the entrance to the terror chamber, Crew flashed his torch on to the stake and swore, a thing he rarely did, at the sight of Denver, tied securely to the stake.

All Denver could see was the dazzling brilliance of the torch in the dense darkness.

"Who is it?" he cried.

"Denver, you poor kid," Crew exclaimed. "It's me, Crew, from Beetham. Thank God you're alive."

"I knew He would answer my prayer," the boy

declared, while Crew shone his torch on the knots and began unfastening them. "As soon as I started praying, I wasn't frightened any more. I knew that someone would come and I kept on praying, though he said it would be a hundred years before anyone found my bones. They'll never get me again, will they? I couldn't bear it."

"Don't worry, my son. You're safe now," Marshall said. "Who was the fiend who tied you up here?"

"I don't know his name, sir. I thought he'd come to rescue me when he came into the bedroom. But I wasn't the only one. Hamil and O'Rory are tied up in the dark passages. I cut the rope on one upstairs, and undid the rope on the other one before the man dropped me down the hole into the passage that leads here. You must go and get the others, the house is on fire. I don't mind staying here while you get them. I'm not afraid any more. I can pray if I get frightened again."

"You blessed little sport," Crew exclaimed as he cast off the last cord and Denver stepped away from the stake.

"I can stay here. You must go and get the others," Denver insisted. He hesitated a moment. "Or...if you like I will come with you. Yes, I know I shall be all right if I come with you. You are the champion boxer in the school, aren't you, Crew?"

Crew chuckled, he was so relieved at seeing that Denver had apparently suffered no ill effects from what he had gone through. "Something like that," he said. "What do you think, sir? I'll take him back and leave him in your car, if you like."

"That's the last thing we'll do," Marshall replied grimly. "Now we've found him, we won't let him out of our sight. Gæatorex is mad. No doubt about that. And he's adrift somewhere. He's not getting a second chance at Denver. Go ahead, Crew. Into the passage. Denver next, then me. Mortimer, you are rearguard. Flash your torch and look behind now and again... Quick as you can, Crew. There's no time to lose."

They entered the opposite passage at a jog-trot. It was easy for Denver to keep up, he had not to bend his head. They had hardly got into the passage when the terror gripped them.

"Great Scott!" Marshall exclaimed. "Now I know what you mean by the terror."

"Keep going," Crew cried. "It'll soon get less."

After a minute, as the apprehension became less, Marshall said, "Never known anything like it. It got me in the knees. Are you all right, Denver?"

"I'm feeling better now, sir. I forgot to pray."

Mortimer said, as they eased down to a smart walk, "We have experienced that before. It seems to lie down if you have the means of checking it when you are approaching it, but as soon as you turn your back on the thing, it seems to rise up and hit you because you are running away, and it seems to have the power of numbing your memory, so that you forget to take any action to counter it."

Marshall said, "I imagine that stake was driven through a witch by the people who killed her. I expect as she died, she cursed this place and anyone who came near it. Never mind that. We can talk about it when this party is over."

As they went on, Marshall cross-questioned Denver, who told him about the other bodies in the upstairs passage. He said these were the men who had captured him, and Greatorax had said the police were going to take them away, but then Greatorax had said the police were also shut up and could not escape. It all sounded very garbled.

"Do you know how the house caught fire?" Marshall asked.

"I don't know, sir. I think the man set it on fire. I saw it when we came out of my bedroom."

"Obviously the man is a raving lunatic. I pray God we get there in time."

Suddenly Crew exclaimed, "There's a light."

They could all see the bright light of a torch coming towards them.

Crew called out, "Hullo, is that you, Pat?"

There was no immediate reply, then a voice answered, "We're the police. Who are you?"

Neither party could see much of the others, but as they came together, Crew's torch revealed the first man dressed in a badly-fitting policeman's uniform. This aroused Crew's suspicions at once.

As they came together, the leader was shining his torch on Crew and those behind him, and Crew was doing the same on the remaining two in police uniforms.

Crew said, "We're from Ramsden College. Do you know the Grange is on fire? Two of our boys were in the Grange. Where are they?"

Baker, who was leading, said, "We haven't seen any

boys. We're looking for Greatorrex and the boy he kidnapped. Out of the way and let's pass."

Before Crew could reply, Denver piped up, "That's one of the men who captured me, but they weren't wearing police clothes."

"There's dirty work somewhere," Crew said. Without another word he nearly lifted Baker off his feet with a terrific uppercut, then sprang at Griff like a tiger. Griff went down before such a powerful onslaught. Crew literally walked over him. Cookie was turning to run, but Crew caught him a blow on the ear that sent him flying. Crew cried,

"Come on, Ramsden. That house is burning. Let these go, we're after Pat and Hamil."

Marshall had picked up Denver. He switched on his torch and walked over Baker, who was trying to rise, but a biff from Marshall's knee in his face sent him down again. Mortimer put his torch on and as he moved on, Griff reached up and dragged him down. Marshall put Denver down, shone his torch on Griff and Mortimer-struggling on the ground, watched his opportunity and got both his hands to Griff's throat, dropping his torch in the process. Griff released Mortimer to grab at the hands at his throat.

"Pick up the torch and get on," Marshall cried.

Mortimer, quite unperturbed, picked up the torch and squeezed past Marshall. Then he saw Baker's torch on the ground.

"Hold him, sir. I'll get their torch."

Then he squeezed back past Marshall, who was slowly throttling Griff. Baker was sitting up. Mortimer

caught him a terrific kick in the middle of the back. The man's whole body winced and stiffened. Before he could recover Mortimer had picked up the torch and squeezed past Marshall, who released Griff and left him gasping.

"Nice work," Marshall said. "Come along. Leave them."

Crew had been standing over Cookie, who made no attempt to rise. In a minute the four were moving quickly along the passage again.

"I hope they weren't policemen," Mortimer said.

"Not a hope," Marshall replied. "Their language gave them away. As soon as I heard them swearing, I knew we were doing the right thing."

In a few minutes they came to the steps. Up they went. When Crew stepped into the passage, his torch picked up the two policemen. The passage was like an oven.

"Phew, it's hot," he said, as he bent down over the men. "Who are you. Are you police?"

"Yes, who are you? Unfasten us, will you?" the second constable said.

"These are police. Shine your torch on the knots, sir," Crew said as he began casting off the lashings of the two men, and Marshall came up. "Have you seen two boys from Ramsden College?"

"There was one here, but he's gone upstairs, and the inspector too," the second constable replied.

Marshall said, "Mortimer, you finish untying these chaps. Denver, stay here. Come along, Crew. These walls will be caving in soon with this heat. Which is the way upstairs?"

The constable replied, "Along that passage and turn right."

Crew and Marshall hurried along the passage and turned right. They soon found the steep steps and climbed up them.

"There^s they are," Crew exclaimed, as his torch picked up recumbent forms in the distance. Both he and Marshall ran, little clouds of dust rising behind them. "Pat, Hamill!" he shouted, but there was no reply. It was so hot that Crew felt beads of sweat running down his cheeks. The hot air made breathing a physical discomfort.

"The swine have gagged them," he muttered as he came up to the three bound forms. The inspector was nearest him. Crew had his gag off first. Marshall^s was doing the same for Pat.

"You're just about in time," the inspector gasped, as his lashings were undone. "We've been hearing the walls cracking. Have you seen anything of my men?"

"Yes, they were tied up down below," Crew replied.

He ran to Hamil to release him. Pat was sitting up. He said, "I was giving up the ghost. I thought ye'd never come. I says to myself, says I, this is the end of your lovely life, Pat. Let it be a lesson never to break school rules again. I'm still wondering what made ye come at this time o' night."

"Lend me your torch," the inspector said, "I must get down to my men. We must get out and put out a call for these chaps. Attempted murder will be the charge this time. They can't have got far."

"We laid out three of them five minutes ago,"

Marshall stated. "They won't get far. We've got the boy, but Greateorex has got away."

Crew was helping Hamil to his feet. At that moment they heard a crash and the whole place shook. The next instant, with a series of sharp snaps like the cracking of a stock whip, a long crack appeared in the wall beside them.

"Get a move on. The walls are going. Lead the way, Crew," Marshall shouted. Crew ran first along the passage, showing the way with his torch, the others following. Marshall came last with his torch. Hamil was in front of him, swaying. Marshall took his elbow to help him. Crew went down the steep steps and shone his torch as the others came down. As Marshall reached the bottom, there was another crash. A wall of the upper passage must have given way. The flickering light of flames could be seen at the top of the steps. They hurried along to the exit passage.

"Down the steps, quick! The walls are going," Marshall cried to the little group they could see waiting.

Hurriedly the party descended the steps. Marshall, who stood watching, thought that in other circumstances it would have been a comical sight, seeing the three policemen in their underclothes and socks and boots, going down the steps. Another crash made him realise what a close thing it had been for the three who had been in the upstairs passage.

Down in the subterranean passage, the air was cool and everyone felt safe. The second constable was saying, "We thought 'twas you, Inspector, when we saw

the uniform. They caught us proper, though I did have a go at the one with the gun, but t'other two were too many for me."

"That's all right, constable. I have no doubt you did your duty," Witing replied. "The three of them caught me properly too. Now we must go out to catch our uniforms."

"You're jolly lucky to have your underclothes," Marshall said. "Another ten minutes and we should have been too late. Come along now. Let's get going. Crew, you go first. You next, Inspector, then your two men. I'll keep Denver in front of me. Pat and Hamil, you follow the policemen."

At the mention of Denver, the inspector turned and said, "When you were in bed, why didn't you tell me you were the chap we were looking for?"

Denver said, "I thought you and Mr. Greatorax were on the same side. I know all about it now. Mortimer told me while we were waiting for you."

"It's been a proper bag of tricks," Witing replied as he fell in behind Crew and the procession began their return journey through the passage.

"Where does this passage come out?" Witing asked, as they tramped along.

Crew told him about the hole in the woods, and he began to explain about the fear that inhabited the passages on each side of the terror chamber, but before he had gone very far, he stopped and exclaimed, "You're in luck, Inspector. Your uniforms are here."

The torch had picked up three figures sitting side by side. When the inspector saw them, he chuckled.

"That's a happy sight. I'd never have held my head up again if I'd had to report at headquarters in this rig."

As the party came up to the three, Crew said,

"What's the matter? Why didn't you escape when you had the chance?"

"You know why," Baker replied. "That thing in the passage."

"I know. I thought you'd never get past that," Crew chuckled. "You hadn't the moral courage to nullify the fear."

"They'll need more than that to nullify the charge of attempted murder," Witing said. "Get up and get out of those uniforms," he ordered.

"I'm not moving. If you want 'em, you'll have to take 'em," Baker answered sullenly.

Crew suddenly thought of the manner in which this cold-blooded fiend had deliberately left five men to be burned to death. All idea of fair play, and telling a sitting man to stand up before you hit him, departed. He hit Baker between the eyes. The man's head, six inches from the stone wall, smacked back against the wall with a thud, and he rolled over on his side and lay motionless. Crew was seething. He stepped to Griff and would have done the same to him, but Marshall snapped,

"Steady, Crew, steady." Then, more gently, as Crew stopped. "I feel the same, but we must let the law deal with them."

Griff and Cookie got to their feet and proceeded to take off the uniforms.

"Sorry," Crew said. "That's never happened to me before, and it won't ever happen again."

Pat blurted out, "Sorry be blowed, Crewee. I'm glad ye did it. He was the dirtiest of the bunch."

"I feel the same, Crewee," Hamil said.

"I appreciate your feelings," Marshall said. "If ever men deserved lynching, those three deserve it."

Witing told the two constables to get the uniform off Baker. Then the three policemen dressed themselves in their respective uniforms.

The second constable produced two pairs of handcuffs from his pocket, and Hopkins also had a pair. Baker had come to by the time the policemen were dressed, and he and his two mates were handcuffed. Then the party went forward, the three prisoners gibbering with fear as they passed through the terror chamber. It was quite a business climbing out, and Denver had to be lifted up. On their way to the road, Marshall said,

"My car is at the roadside, Inspector. I'll take Denver and Pat and Hamil back to school, and I think we can cram you in as far as Muir's house. Then you can telephone Salsbury for cars. Crew and Mortimer can watch the prisoners with your two men, and perhaps you could drop them back at the school."

"Thank you; I'll do that, Mr....? I don't know your name."

"Marshall. I'm a master at Ramsden."

So it was agreed, but when they came to the road, there was no sign of the car.

"Where exactly did you leave the car, Mr. Marshall?"

"Oh, there is no doubt about it, Inspector. I left it

here, and I'm pretty sure who took it. Greatorex had left young Denver tied to that stake you saw in the chamber we passed through, and he thought the boy would never be found. He must have been around when we came up, and he must have looked on my car as a gift from Heaven."

"I see," Witing agreed. "Yes, that's plain enough. Nobody round here would take it. We shall have to walk to the Werley Constabulary. I expect Muir will be at the fire."

So the party set out for Muir's house, which they reached in a quarter of an hour. There was a light in the window and Mrs. Muir was up. She confirmed that her husband had gone to the fire. They had all seen the glare in the sky. Witing telephoned Police Headquarters in Salisbury, giving the number and description of Marshall's car, and also a description of Greatorex. When he had finished, he announced that a prison van and a police car were coming out. Mrs. Muir said she had tea and sandwiches ready for her husband's return with three men who had gone from Werley, and the party could start on those. The prisoners were locked in the only cell of the constabulary, and the remainder of the party packed into the living-room and sat on four chairs and the floor. In a few minutes, the various stories were being told over welcome cups of tea and sandwiches.

Pat said, "Now that we can talk in peace and security, will ye tell me how, by the grace of God, ye came out at this time of the night or morning or whatever it is?"

Crew looked at his watch. "It's twenty to five, Pat. I woke up at ten to two." He described his dream about Hamil. "I don't suppose I should have paid much attention to it if we hadn't heard that broadcast on telepathy and spent the rest of the evening discussing it. What I want to know is, Ham, did you send out an S.O.S. at any time?"

"I cannot say that I sent out an S.O.S.," Hamil replied. "But I was thinking a great deal about you and wondering if I would still be alive when you came exploring in the afternoon. But wait a minute, I have remembered something. I do remember at one time thinking about you sleeping peacefully in your bed, and now I recollect that I thought if you knew what had happened to us, I was sure you would get up and come to our rescue."

"That settles it," Crew said. "Somehow or other you must have got through to me. It's a pity we couldn't know just when you thought that."

Marshall said, "The time could only have been when you received the message. Telepathic messages don't drift in space and then light on someone. The final confirmation is that you dreamed his hands were caught in his webbing behind his back, when in fact they were lashed behind his back."

"And all that really matters," Pat put in, "is that we and Denver are here."

"The fact that three policemen are here, instead of in Kingdom Come, is taken as a matter of course," Witing said. "There is no doubt about the amount we are indebted to you, Mr. Crew."

"Not a bit of it," Crew protested. "You owe it all to the S.N.O." In reply to their mystified looks, he explained. "Senior Naval Officer, Lieutenant Commander Marshall, D.S.O. You can thank your lucky stars he is on Ramsden's staff. I ask you, what other master would have done what he did?" •

"What did ye do, sir?" Pat broke in.

Marshall was grinning. Before he could reply, Crew continued. "Naval fashion, without wasting a word, he just said, 'I'll get my car out. Open the main gates and meet me there.'"

"Emergencies call for prompt action," Marshall stated. "I told you at the beginning this thing would need delicate handling first, and smart action at the end. That is why I wanted Mr. Commer kept out of it."

"If this had been a Naval party, you'd have got a bar to your D.S.O., sir," Crew said.

"I shall get a bar all right. Barred from Ramsden, and a taxi to the station since Greatorex has pinched my car."

Before anyone could sympathise, a knock at the door was the signal that the police cars had arrived. The party broke up. The three prisoners and Hopkins and the second constable went off in the police van to Salisbury. The inspector and Marshall and the boys returned to Ramsden in the saloon. It was a tight fit, but the distance was short and after all that Pat and Hamil and Denver had endured, the discomfort was relative luxury.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Exit the Villain

'THE school gates were always shut at night. It took a few minutes to knock up the lodge keeper, who was one of the school gardeners. He came out in his overcoat.

"Good morning, Matthews," Marshall said. "We could not open the gates from this side. Great news. We've got young Denver. Ring through and try to get Mr. Moore at Beetham and tell him we are coming up."

Matthews was successful, and Mr. Moore, in a dressing-gown, was waiting at the door when they arrived.

His greeting was typical. "So this is what goes on at

night as soon as my light is out. Four seniors, led by the Captain of the House, go out night foraging."

Crew said, "We've brought back a very good excuse, sir."

"So I see," Moore replied. "More than delighted to see you back in the fold, Denver. Good morning, Inspector. Are you coming in to hear the story, or do you know it?"

"I think I'd better come in and hear it, sir. I have a very full report to make out."

They followed Mr. Moore to his room, where he switched on an electric fire and told them to sit down where they could find a place.

"I won't ring the headmaster yet," Moore said, "we'll let him have the good news with his morning cup of tea. O'Rory and Hamil, you've obviously been in a hard game, some rough tackling I see. Now, get on with the story. Who is going to begin?"

Marshall said, "I think Pat had better begin. It seems to have started with him."

Pat and Hamil between them described their side of the adventure; Crew, Marshall and Mortimer naturally followed on; then Inspector Witing told how he and his men had been caught; and finally Denver told what he knew.

"So that's the whole story," Moore said when they had finished. "I suppose O'Rory and Hamil are the heroes of the piece, Denver the innocent victim, Crew, Marshall and Mortimer the heroic rescue party, and where would you say that you came in, Inspector?"

"I think we were a bit of the scenery that fell down,"

Witing replied. "And now I must get back. We've got to get busy after Greatorrex. I don't think he will have got very far. It was a mistake taking that car. When it's found it will give us a line on him."

When the inspector had gone, Mr. Moore told Pat and Hamil to get upstairs and have a hot bath and then go to bed.

He added, "I think you will get your ten thousand pounds. If it hadn't been for you, I don't like to think what might have happened to Denver. What the headmaster's attitude will be I cannot say, but I imagine the press will make heroes of you, and that will do the school no harm. Off you go then."

Pat and Hamil, with their battered faces and sore bodies but with happy grins on their faces, left the room. Crew and Mortimer sat awaiting Mr. Moore's verdict on their part of the adventure. Moore turned to Marshall.

"It is a fortunate coincidence for all parties that Crew rang you up. If they had rung me, I should have informed the police, who would have only been in time to find some charred bodies. Your prompt action saved the day. God bless the Navy, always in the right spot at the right time, doing the right thing."

"Thank you, sir. That's very nice of you," Marshall said. "Do you know anything about that extraordinary house?"

"Oh yes, the place is unique. It was built by a man who was very much ahead of his time. He thought that a house with double walls would be warmer in winter and cooler in summer. Then a later owner, who lived

in very troubled political times, realised that he had a house complete with secret passages. He built the priest's hole and put your spy-holes into the rooms and built your underground escape passage. All I can say about your terror chamber is that a witch, who was said to have direct communication with the devil, was killed, and a stake driven through her chest when she was buried. It looks as though your terror chamber is her burial place. I happen to be writing a history of the county. I got all this information from books in the Grange library. We'll talk about that later. Now, what about Crew and Mortimer?"

These two decided they would carry on as usual.

When Marshall and the two boys had left, Moore turned to Denver. "Well, young Denver, the best thing we can do with you is to put you to bed. But I won't send you up to the dormitory till the house has gone to breakfast. You curl up on my settee. Cover yourself with that rug and try to get to sleep. I'll call you when we are ready for you."

Denver did as he was told, and in five minutes he was asleep.

Moore rang up the headmaster, who answered from his bed, where he was drinking his early-morning cup of tea.

"Hullo. Dr. Mansfield speaking."

"This is Moore speaking."

"Good morning, Charles. Does this mean news?"

"Very much so. Denver is asleep in my room at present."

"This is almost too good to be true. That inspector deserves a mention. Where did he find the boy?"

"He didn't. Denver was at the Grange, as the inspector suspected, but he was rescued by Marshall and two boys from Beetham."

There was a slight pause as the headmaster digested this piece of information.

"That is a most extraordinary statement. When did all this happen?"

Moore told the story briefly, from the discovery of the passage. He ended up, "It was Marshall's prompt action that saved the day. When Crew and Mortimer rang him, he got out his car and carried out the rescue expedition with them. To my mind that almost gives the rescue party official sanction. What do you think?"

"I think that fate has been kind to give us such a let-out. Good for Marshall. I should hate to punish boys whose initiative has done the school such a good turn. I will cable the father immediately. Bring Marshall and the boys along to have tea with me this afternoon and I will hear the whole story. Good-bye, Charles. I shall rise with a blithe spirit, a thing I never expected last night."

Mr. Moore rang off with a satisfied smile. He had been able to present a case which had got his boys off scot-free. Although he and Dr. Mansfield had been close friends for the greater part of their lives, their friendship would not have prevented the Head from expelling the boys, if he had considered their conduct merited such a punishment. As it was, they had broken school rules and would have to be punished. Mr. Moore made a mental note to stop their pocket money for a month, but later in the term, after the ten thousand pounds had been awarded.

At 7.40 a.m., Crew and Mortimer marched along with Beetham to the great dining-hall for breakfast. The maids and housemen serving the meal soon passed word around that the Grange had been burned down during the night, but Crew at the head of his table announced the most exciting news.

Tyson remarked on the absence of Pat and Hamil.

"What's happened, Crew? Are they ill?"

"Not ill," Crew replied. "Pretty badly battered" though." Casually, while he continued to eat his porridge, he remarked between mouthfuls, "They fought the gang who took Denver." Unbelieving silence greeted this remark. Green, the other prefect at the table, and Tyson, and the few near them who could hear Crew's remarks, smiled at the prospect of some leg-pull.

"They brought Denver back at half past five this morning," Crew continued. "They'd been up all night, so Moore sent them to bed."

"What is this, a new 'shaggy dog' story?" Tyson demanded. "Denver hasn't really been found?"

"He certainly has. I left him in Moore's room this morning at half past six."

"But what were you doing there at that time?"

"Marshall, Mortimer and I came back with Pat and Hamil and Denver. We pulled them out of the burning Grange just before the walls collapsed."

"Marshall? What's he got to do with it?"

Green said, "Crew, you are maddening. Is it fact or fiction?"

Crew felt he had had his fun. He said, "Fact, I give

you my word." Then he told the whole story, that is to say, his side of it. Tyson's last remark, before the hammer fell for the end of breakfast, was, "I should like to know what has happened to Greatorex. I hope they get him."

Actually, when Greatorex left Denver tied to the stake in the Terror Chamber, he had been surprised at the boy's fortitude. He had expected to derive considerable pleasure from the screams of a boy terrified half out of his wits by the evil that appeared to inhabit that place. Instead, the boy had calmly submitted to being fastened to the stake and left in that Stygian darkness, without even a cry of anguish or a plea for mercy. Greatorex could not know of the boy's implicit belief that the prayers he had been offering up would be answered. From this belief he had derived his calm and courage.

Greatorex made his way out of the passage and reached the road. He set out to walk to Salisbury. As he approached the gates of the Grange, he saw two cars, one behind the other, with powerful headlights, approaching in the distance. He also heard the fire bell and realised this was the fire brigade from Salisbury. He had no wish to be seen, and quickly climbed over the wall that bounded the grounds of the Grange. He saw the fire engine and the escape ladder turn into the drive and race up to the burning house. The thought occurred to him that he might be able to get his own car from the garage, so he stole along through the trees, crossed the drive, and worked his way round to the garage. He stood watching the firemen, in the light of

the flames, rigging their hoses. The main body of the house was blazing from every window, but the kitchen and garage wing was still dark. One of the hoses was being run in this direction. This was a nuisance, as the men there would see him if he tried to open the garage doors. While he stood and watched, fascinated by the blazing spectacle, he chuckled at the thought of the eight souls for whom he had started this mighty pyre.

Almost unnoticed, odd figures and groups had made their way up the drive and stood watching. Even in this lonely country district, a fire seemed to attract folk from nowhere. The firemen at the kitchen wing shouted and the onlookers ran over to them. A door had been smashed in and also some windows, and everyone was helping to pass out as much furniture as could be salvaged.

Greatorrex realised that the numbers working there rendered it impossible for him to get the car out, so he turned and made his way out of the grounds. The headlights of a car coming from Werley caused him to turn in order to climb over the wall till it had passed. But suddenly the headlights went out. He stood and waited to see what the car was going to do. Then the side lights went out. He thought this very strange and set out to investigate. When he came up to it, he found it was parked on the verge. He shaded his torch with his hand and looked in. It was empty. He tried the door and found it unlocked. Within a couple of minutes he had slid into the driving seat, started the engine and was driving in the direction of Salisbury.

The petrol gauge showed that the tank was nearly full. He felt that luck was with him and stepped on the accelerator. This piece of good fortune caused him to change his plans about going to London by train. He decided he would drive there.

As he drove through Salisbury, a church clock chimed the quarter hour after three. He reckoned it would take him three hours to reach the outskirts of London, and at half past six he left the car in a side road and caught an electric train at Staines. By seven-thirty he was in his flat in Duke Street. He was feeling very tired, so he undressed and went to bed.

He woke at noon. Then he went out and had lunch. He bought a lunchtime edition of the evening papers as he was on his way to his bank, from which he intended to draw some thousands of pounds. His intention was to fly to South America, to a country there from which it would not be possible to extradite him. He would start an engineering business and begin a new life, now that he had had his revenge on Harry Denver, and had dispelled the fog of hate that had clouded his mind for the last fifteen years. Apart from the obsession of hate, which had formed his madness, he was as sane as the next man and a very clever engineer. He was pleased to find that he could now think of Harry Denver without any emotion at all. It was as though his actions of the previous night had been the last fling of his madness, which was now either dead, or at least dormant.

He entered the bank and wrote out a cheque for the sum he wished to withdraw. On being presented with the cheque, the cashier raised his eyebrows.

"Will you take a seat for a few minutes, Mr. Greatorrex. This is rather a large sum, of which we have not had notice. I must just have a word with the manager. We will let you have the money in a few minutes."

Greatorrex had expected this. He sat down and opened his paper. The sight of the headlines caused him to sit up stiffly and tense with emotion.

KIDNAPPED BOY FOUND. SIR HARRY
DENVER'S SON RESCUED FROM BURNING
GRANGE. KIDNAPPERS ARRESTED. MAS-
TER AND SCHOOLBOYS EFFECT THE
RESCUE.

His madness had not been dead, only dormant. The passion for revenge flamed again in his mind. This unbelievable upsetting of all his plans was just part of the luck which Harry Denver had enjoyed all his life. He read the report of the rescue of Denver and the eight whom he had thought dead beneath the funeral pyre he had lighted. The three prisoners had made a statement to the police, imputing the guilt of the whole conspiracy to Greatorrex. He did not know it, but a few minutes after he had left the flat, the police had arrived there looking for him. Before he had finished reading the reports, the cashier informed him that the money was available, and handed him over the counter a number of wrapped packets of notes. Greatorrex thanked him and borrowed a small canvas bag to carry them. He was in a hurry to leave, as he thought it likely that the police would visit the bank and instruct them to withhold any payments in his name.

As he walked away from the bank, he saw a black police car draw up and an inspector enter the bank. He hurried away, undecided for the moment as to his next plan of action. If he went to a small hotel he would attract more notice than at a large one. The important thing was to act normally. He took a taxi to a large hotel at the Marble Arch. On the way he stopped at one or two shops and bought a suitcase, some underwear and pyjamas, and hair brush and toilet articles. At the shop where he bought the suitcase, he also bought a small leather case with a good lock. In this he placed the bank's canvas bag with the banknotes.

He registered at the hotel in the name of Thomas Swan, and gave an imaginary address in Bristol. While he did this, more fuel was added to his burning hate of Harry Denver. His passport in the name of Greatorrex was now useless to him, and until he could obtain a new one under a false name, and that was not going to be easy, he could not leave the country. Not that he wanted to leave the country at the moment. He would have to plan all over again.

He obtained a receipt for the leather case, which was to be placed in the hotel safe. Before going to his room, he bought two more evening papers and took them up to read. Their contents did nothing to ease his feelings. They each contained a description of him and the clothes he had been wearing, and stated that anyone seeing him should report at once to the nearest police station. He ground his teeth in fury. And it had all gone wrong through those two inquisitive little

beasts who had found the secret passage. He determined, if the opportunity arose, to be revenged on them also. One of the papers had said that Sir Harry Denver was flying to England. On reading this, Greatorex wondered if it might not be better to take his revenge directly on this man who, he considered, had blighted his life. In any case, before he started planning, he must alter his appearance. He had read that one of the simplest ways of altering your appearance was to change your hair style, so he took his new brush and comb and parted his hair in the middle. He was surprised at the difference it made, especially as he had plastered his hair down with a fixative he had bought. Now he felt he was sufficiently unlike the newspaper description as not to be identified easily by anyone who had not known him previously. He had friends in London in the underworld, but he dared not communicate with them, as the papers had stated that in addition to kidnapping, he was to be charged with attempted murder. The curious thing about his mentality was that he was not depressed, but furiously angry that all his plans had been frustrated.

While Greatorex was in London, undecided whether to attempt again to catch and kill young Denver, or to shoot his father when he arrived, irrespective of consequences, a cheerful party was gathered in Dr. Mansfield's drawing-room at Ramsden. Obeying the Head's instructions, Mr. Moore had brought Marshall and Denver and the four seniors along to tea, which Mrs. Mansfield was pouring out and a maid handing round. The boys were instructed to help themselves to

pastries while they told their stories. The Head was more than interested in the fearful apprehension that existed round the terror chamber.

He said, "It has been established beyond any doubt that these phenomena do exist and are generally supposed to arise from evil influences, but no satisfactory explanation of them has been made as yet. Shakespeare brings the idea into *Hamlet*: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' Why are you four grinning?"

Mortimer replied, "That quotation is a great favourite of ours, sir."

"It is useful for explaining away mysteries incapable of solution."

Pat put in, "Sure we use it for some of Mr. Marshall's mathematical formulæ, sir."

Everyone laughed. "But we cannot allow this thing to continue," the Head stated. "What you have told me clearly proves that it can be dealt with. I shall ask our Bishop to come and exorcise the place. Only the other day I read that a house in Somerset suffering similar phenomena was exorcised by a bishop, with satisfactory results."

At this moment, the maid came in with a telegram. The Head opened it and announced, "Here is some news for you. Sir Harry Denver is arriving tomorrow, so you will be able to apply for the ten thousand pounds in person."

Pat asked excitedly, "Do you think we'll get it, sir?"

"Frankly, I think what you four did fulfil all the conditions."

Hamil said, "We had decided if we got it, sir, to include Mr. Marshall. We feel that we owe our lives to him."

Marshall stood and bowed. The Head said, "You do, without question. His promptness and his car saved the day. He broke every rule of the school, but I have to remember that Nelson was honoured for some of his greatest victories after he had broken every law to achieve them. If Mr. Marshall has the same spirit, Ramsden is fortunate indeed to have him on the staff. I should be a poor headmaster if I thought otherwise."

Marshall said, "Thank you for that, sir. It makes me doubly glad to stay here."

"But do not think," the Head turned to the four, "that I shall overlook any similar escapade in future. This time, your initiative averted a tragedy, but there must be no more midnight explorations. Is that clear?"

Crew said, "Thank you, sir. We fully realise that."

"Then good-bye, and I hope future Marshall formulae will not require the use of the Horatio quotation."

When Mr. Moore and the five boys arrived back at Beetham, they found reporters from two national Sunday papers awaiting them. Each offered what seemed a fabulous sum for Pat's and Hamil's story of the whole affair. Mr. Moore said he would only permit the articles to be published if the interview took place in his presence, and he had only half an hour to spare. He also said that the cheques must be sent to him, as the boys were under age. The reporters agreed and finally asked if they could be taken to the passage and the terror chamber, but to this Mr. Moore would not

agree, as he said he did not want scores of people making expeditions to the place. Reluctantly the reporters accepted this decision and hurried back to London to get their stories in.

The four felt they would never forget that weekend. Had they been less sane than they were, they would have had their heads turned. Wherever they went, they were the cynosure of all eyes. Juniors could do no more than gaze in silent reverence and admiration, but seniors and masters missed no opportunities of speaking to them, and always the only subject they would discuss was some phase of that incredible Friday night. At last, the four became so tired of it all that they retired to the Corner, and pinned a notice on the door saying, 'Do Not Disturb.' They felt they would be glad when Monday and work came along.

But Monday brought a new form of annoyance, shoals of letters, most of which were addressed to Pat and Hamil. Newspaper readers from all over the country wrote, some to express admiration of their courage, a few to point out that by breaking school rules they had risked their lives; quite a number told them what the writers would have done to save the Grange and obtain rapid arrest of the Greatorex gang; and a surprising number of the letters contained invitations to spend part of the coming holidays with the children of the writers. The letters were so numerous that the boys nearly missed the few from their own parents and relations.

Pat expressed the views of all four when he said, just before starting out for morning school,

"Sure I've learned one thing from all this, and that is never to allow myself to become famous again. What you get in money does not make up for the wear and tear to your nerves."

After morning school they received instructions to report to the headmaster. When they arrived at his house they found a magnificent Rolls-Royce at the door, and, standing beside it, talking with the headmaster, a tall sunburned man with amazingly blue eyes. Denver was there also, so they realised that this must be the fabulous Sir Harry Denver. When they came up, he said, with a broad smile that seemed to have all the good nature of the open veldt in it,

"Hullo, young fellows, I'm in your debt to the extent of one son. I've repaid the capital; your headmaster has a cheque for ten thousand which I understand you are sharing with Mr. Marshall. But the interest will always be owing, and that will take the form of anything I can do for any of you if you decide to make your future in South Africa. We can always do with young men of your type. Now, jump into the jeep, and we'll trek to Salsbury for lunch. I have persuaded Dr. Mansfield to give you the rest of the day off."

Crew said, "Thank you very much, sir. We'd better change, we're only wearing school clothes."

The big man laughed. "Nonsense. It's your bodies I'm going to feed, not your clothes. You have no objection, Dr. Mansfield?"

"Certainly not. Off you go and enjoy yourselves."

They were surprised at the Head's ready acquiescence. They did not know then that Sir Harry

Denver had also written a cheque for ten thousand pounds to build a library for the school. They all packed into the Rolls and the chauffeur drove it away.

The conversation took the form to which the boys had become accustomed during the previous two days, but this time they were not bored with the repetition. They were each much too excited at the thought of a fifth share of that cheque in the Head's study. The Rolls drew up at the entrance to the one large hotel in Salisbury. Millionaire guests were rare at the Royal Crown, and the manager as well as the hall porter came out to greet the party. They went into the dining-room, where a special table in the centre of the room had been reserved for them. Sir Harry and Crew sat at each end of the table, Mortimer and young Denver on one side and Pat and Hamil on the other. Pat was intrigued by a mirror opposite him, set on one of the pillars to the oak-beamed ceiling. In it he could see the guests behind him, and the entrance to the dining-room.

When they were ordering their first course, Pat chose pea soup. He apologised, "I know it's an unfashionable dish, but it's my favourite soup, and I like a lot of it, and scalding hot."

Sir Harry said to the waiter, "Make a note of that, waiter. This is a special occasion and these young men must have exactly what they want."

The waiter smiled. "Sure I'll see to that. I notice he comes from the same country as myself."

When the man had gone to fetch their orders, Sir Harry said, "Now I want to hear the whole story, but first I'll tell you one. You told me in the car that you'd

heard Felix Greatorex say he had waited fifteen years to have revenge on me for stealing his invention and marrying his girl. That is not true. The lady had promised to marry me before he had even asked her. And he offered me his invention and I bought it and paid the price he asked. The man has a warped mind. At one time we were partners, but he couldn't run straight and I saw it was going to make trouble for me, so I severed the partnership. He has a good business of his own, but he is also the largest dealer in illicit diamonds in the Union. The police have been after him for years but he has always been too clever for them. Because of this and his crooked ways, decent folk in the Union will have nothing to do with him, and he thinks that I have put society against him, which is the basis of his crazy idea of taking revenge on me."

He took a letter from his pocket and laid it on the table. He said, "This is what he sent me this morning, threatening to shoot me on sight. But I imagine it will be his last threat. He won't be at liberty long, with half the police in England after him."

Two waiters appeared and served the first course. Their movements obscured the view of the other guests in the dining-room, which was why no one observed a tall figure striding across the room between the tables. The waiters departed and the tall figure stopped behind Pat's chair. Greatorex's voice said,

"You have your son, but you will not live to enjoy him."

Pat looked up into the mirror and saw Greatorex pointing an automatic pistol at Sir Harry Denver. In

a flash Pat reacted. His plate of soup went flying up over his head and the scalding contents into Greatoréx's face. The pistol went off and the bullet went high into the wall. Crew was out of his chair in one leap and he caught the pistol and wrenched it out of Greatoréx's hand. In a moment the dining-room was in an uproar. Waiters, the manager and the hall porter rushed across and flung themselves on the madman who was struggling with the strength of a maniac with Crew and Hamil and Pat. In a matter of seconds the numbers bore Greatoréx to the ground, where he squirmed helplessly beneath the weight of half-a-dozen men. To complete the scene, Inspector Witing and two constables appeared. They had received word from London that Greatoréx had been traced to Salisbury, and before he was allowed to rise handcuffs had been snapped on his wrists.

As he was taken away he presented the most extraordinary sight, his hair, face and shoulders all smeared with pea soup.

When order had been restored and the mess cleared up, Sir Harry Denver's first words were,

"Waiter, fetch another plate of hot pea soup for the boy who has just saved my life."

